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# Dress as Symbolic Resistance

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# Dress as Symbolic Resistance in Asia

Special Issue edited by Mina Roces

**Book Review**

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# Dress as Symbolic Resistance in Asia

## Editorial

Mina Roces

During the past decades, Asian Studies scholars have made outstanding contributions on the topic of how political elites have promoted changes in clothing in their projects of modernising their citizens or creating new nationalist identities (such as by inventing national dress).[1] But the visual power of the politics of appearances allows also marginal and oppressed groups to send powerful messages. This special issue proposes to shift the analytical lens from the way sartorial changes have come from above – i.e., from political elites in power – to examining instead how resistance movements, including women's movements, social movements, minorities and marginalised groups, utilise the semiotics of dress to advance their agendas from below. Thus, this issue underscores the importance of dress, bodily deportment, fashion and etiquette, analysing how these have been intrinsic to the performance of social, political, cultural, religious and gendered identities, and in challenging the status quo. The focus here is on how dress and fashion are marshalled for the performance of collective action, socio-political dissent, alternative politics and identity politics. In addition, we also give special attention to gender, because dress is one important way of performing gender. We examine how especially women's movements and women consumers have capitalised on the potential of fashion and accessories to challenge not just the political status quo, but also the hegemonic cultural constructions of the feminine. The political and social contexts for the advocacy that our case studies discuss range from democracies to strict authoritarian regimes.

Our contributors reflect on the following research questions: How has dress been used by those in activist movements, marginal groups and citizens living in authoritarian regimes to fashion new gender/ethnic identities and/or to advance political agendas? How have dress, bodily adornment, fashion and etiquette been intrinsic to the performance of social, political, cultural, religious and/or gendered identities, and in challenging the status quo or participating in "contentious

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politics" (Tarrow / Tilly 2009)? And finally, how might the semiotic power of dress to communicate symbolic resistance serve as a strategy for empowerment?

The words "dress" and "fashion" are used interchangeably (see the explanation in our interview with Valerie Steele in this special issue) although usually "dress" is the preferred vocabulary to mean "clothing, accessories and bodily practices", whereas "fashion" is the term used to refer to the clothing styles that change with the seasons. Our time period is the contemporary era from the late 20th century to 2019. We have deliberately chosen to focus on the more contemporary era, because while the late-19th century and early 20th century can boast of some outstanding work on the politics of dress, the contemporary period from the late 20th century to the present is only beginning to attract attention from Asian Studies specialists. We hope that this special issue will inspire more scholars to help fill in the gaps in the body of work on the topic.

## Dress and Fashion Studies in the Asian context

Although anthropologists and museum curators have long been studying dress and material culture, the field of Dress Studies that mushroomed in the last 25 years examines the topic by focusing on the connections between dress and identity – whether gender identity, religious identity, political/ethnic identity or national identity.[2] In addition, since the research has been strong on intersectionality, the use of dress, deportment and consumption to demonstrate class and status identities has also been explored in the oeuvre.[3] Scholars in dress studies have placed their analysis in cultural, political and historical contexts. The nature of the sources – especially visual photographs and paintings, many of them commissioned and approved by the subjects – means that the study of the semiotics of the many meanings of dress favours the analysis of individual subjects' self-representation or the group's official collective identities. The scholarship is important in demonstrating the ways that dress has been used to communicate specific messages, including fashioning the identities of both individuals and groups.

Now, how have Asian specialists contributed to debates in the field? For one thing, Asian specialists have ensured that the field has moved beyond its Eurocentric origins. Asian specialists have alerted us to the unique meaning of cloth in contexts such as India (Bayly 1986) and the new textiles produced in the region, such as pineapple fibre cloth (Roces 2013). Historians have analysed

1 See for example Bean 1989, Tarlo 1996, Nordholt 1997, Steele / Major 1999, Edwards 2001, Chakrabarty 2002, Peleggi 2002, Niessen et al. 2003, Trivedi 2003, Finnane 2007, Roces / Edwards 2007, Pyun / Wong 2018.

2 Cf. Taylor 2002 on the study of dress history pioneered this field.

3 Cf. Parkins 2002, McNeil / Karaminas 2009, Lynch / Medvedev 2018.

the changes in dress over time (Nordholt 1997, Steele / Major 1999, Finnane 2007, Roces / Edwards 2007, Pyun / Wong 2018, Coo 2019). The colonial period has also provided many rich examples of the way colonial conflict was expressed through disputes over dress practices. In British Burma and British India, conflict arose over shoes, with the British refusing to remove their footwear when visiting the Burmese King or Buddhist temples, and Indians forced to remove their shoes when appearing in juridical courts (Edwards 2007). Scholars also document the ways in which Asian colonial subjects adopted European clothing to receive better treatment and to abolish the stylised formal etiquette required of them by their native aristocracy (Van der Meer 2020). When the Ethical Policy of the Dutch East Indies eased sumptuary laws that required everyone to dress according to their official ethnic attire, from 1913 onwards, Javanese men increasingly wore Dutch dress. The adoption of European dress went beyond the mere physical alteration as it bestowed more confidence on the wearer. As Sukarno aptly put it: "The minute an Indonesian dons trousers he walks erect like any white man" (ibid.: 143).

Since in the age of empire modernisation was equated with Westernisation, the rich context of the Asian region produced case studies of how political elites introduced sartorial transformations to suit their national or anti-colonial policies. Asian political elites adopted Western dress to prove their nations were modern. Both the Meiji Emperor and the Thai King Chulalongkorn advocated the use of Western dress as part of a strategy for sending the message that their nations were "civilised" and should be treated as equals by Western powers (Peleggi 2002, Molony 2007, Malitz 2017, Oksakabe 2018). In the nationalist era, the invention of national dress was accompanied by a rejection of Western dress and Western civilisation for some Asian countries. India and China are the supreme examples to illustrate this. Mohandas K. Gandhi proposed *khadi* (homespun cloth) as the solution to India's poverty, and rejecting foreign goods became fundamental in the struggle for home rule. The expression of Indian nationalist agendas was visibly expressed through the rejection of Western dress (Bean 1989, Tarlo 1996: 80–81). Similarly, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China (1966–1976) launched a "sartorial revolution" (Steele / Major 1999: 55) where Western fashion was targeted as "foreign", "feudal", fatally "bourgeois" (Steele / Major 1999: 59–61), "shameful" and "sinful" (Wu 2009: 2).

The scholarship on Asian fashion has largely focused on Japanese, Chinese, Indian and Indonesian fashion, though Korea and Vietnam also have smaller studies.[4] Japanese designers such as Kenzo, Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo, the founder of the fashion label Comme des Garçons, did not simply demonstrate an equal status to the top fashion designers in the world – their work revolutionised Western fashion. Japanese street fashion brought

4 See Niessen et al. 2003, Slade 2009, Wu 2009, Moden 2015, Sandhu 2015, Lee et al. 2019, Lopez 2020.

in a new type of highly gendered "cute fashion" that expressed the contemporary Japanese "cult of cuteness" (*kawaii*; Tidwell 2006: 398, Steele 2010: 48). Such self-representations contrasted with the idealised reductionist images of Western women in fashionable clothes as "sexy" or authoritative.

The globalisation of fashion, which included the rise of luxury brand names that reached its zenith in the 1980s, influenced the dress histories of this wide region. From about the 1970s onwards, I argue that Asian nations used couture to claim that they were "Third World No More", to borrow from Brent Luvaas, and therefore deserved to move up in the global hierarchy of nations (Luvaas 2013: 203–227). Western fashion, especially couture, became the symbol of modernity and luxury and thus the ultimate marker demonstrating a nation's wealthy status and cosmopolitan identity. From the mid-1980s Western fashion, particularly haute couture, was intrinsic to the image of the new socialist China (Wu 2009: 65). In India, the government effectively welcomed consumer capitalism in the 1990s and the result was "a flood of brand-label clothing, accessories and beauty products and services", eventually including high-end brands such as Christian Dior, Hermes and Salvatore Ferragamo (Wilkinson-Weber 2013: 49).

Arguably the biggest challenge to Western global fashion is Islamic fashion. The rise of Islamic fashion in the wake of the Islamic revivalist movement of the 1970s had an impact in Asian countries with Muslim majorities, most especially in Indonesia, the world's largest Islamic country, as well as in Malaysia and Brunei. Given the increasing Islamisation of Southeast Asia (especially Indonesia and Malaysia) and the rising popularity of Islamic dress, particularly the veil for women, the topic has inspired scholars in this field to produce insightful cutting-edge work, thus setting the scene for the project of de-centring Western fashion.

Elizabeth Bucar has coined the term "pious fashion" to describe the clothing choices of many Muslim women who wish to dress modestly, expressing their Islamic identities and piety, but at the same time want to publicly express their good taste: "pious fashion is extremely popular now; it is considered to demonstrate cosmopolitanism, sophistication, Muslim femininity and good taste" (Bucar 2017: 81). Pious fashion is gendered feminine because "men's clothing does not have to be 'pious' in the same way" (Bucar 2017: 22). In the gendering of fashion and nation in Indonesia, "men's clothing is the marker of the nation's power and modernity; women's clothing is the marker of its morality, honor, and ethnic identity" (Bucar 2017: 22).

## Dress and gender

Dress is one way to perform gender, and women's dress is usually visually the "Other" of men's dress. Feminist scholars have given us insightful analyses of the specific ways that dress expresses cultural constructions of gender. For example, foot-binding in China in the Qing dynasty spoke volumes about the way elite women were expected to remain in the domestic sphere (Edwards 2007, Ko 2005, Finnane 2007).

Historians of the colonial period in Southeast Asia have revealed how men who embraced Western dress as part of the nationalist project sent the message that they were modern and equal to the Western coloniser[5] – yet for women, Western dress raised anxieties about the "modern girl", so that the ideal woman continued to be represented as the bearer and wearer of tradition, attired in national or ethnic dress (Ikeya 2011; Roces 2003, 2007; Taylor 2007). Hence, the invention of national dress in Asia had gendered implications. Male political elites donned the Western garb of power and progress, leaving women in traditional garments – reflecting their position in the nation-state where until the 1930s they remained disenfranchised.

Political regimes that launched policies that claimed to promote gender equality also endorsed a policy of de-gendering dress. In Communist China until the end of the Cultural Revolution, both men and women wore simple peasant clothing with few distinguishing features, and during the Cultural Revolution, both genders wore military uniforms (Finnane 2007). During the Vietnam War and until the 1989 Renovation Era, men and women wore similar black or plain pyjamas, and representations of both sexes showed very few differences in dress (Lowe 1994, Ungar 1994). Given that women's dress was the "Other" of men's dress, and in light of the close links between dress and gender ideals, feminist movements also challenged constructions of the feminine through revolutionary dress. For example, the suffragists in China were part of the anti-footbinding movement, which became a symbol for women's liberation (Edwards 2007).

In this special issue, Barbara Molony analyses the way feminist movements in Japan used the accoutrements of dress in the theatre of protest – tapping on a wooden spoon as a metaphor for housewives-as-consumers and wearing a pink helmet when advocating for reproductive rights. Mary Austin analyses the way the domestic workers' movement in Indonesia, led by prominent Indonesian feminists (given that most domestic workers are women), used the everyday working accessories of the apron and the *serbet* (bandana) as costume in street demonstrations that advocated for their visibility as workers in the private domain and their rights as working women.

5 See Peleggi 2002 and 2007, Molony 2007, Taylor 2007, Van der Meer 2020.

## Dress as symbolic resistance in Asia

A major challenge faced by activists and the marginalised is to make themselves visible, to call attention to their advocacy, or to challenge and resist the status quo. Often in authoritarian regimes or in places where spaces for resistance are severely limited, dress becomes even more important, in what Mary Austin has termed "the politics of presence" (Austin this issue, and Austin forthcoming). Juanjuan Wu's contribution for this special issue is an excellent example of how the ordinary T-shirt communicated messages that went against the official ideology of the Chinese Communist party in the 1990s. Although some of the messages were humorous, such as "I couldn't even be seduced by a woman sitting on my lap", or "I am ugly but I am gentle", others were more explicit, such as "Getting rich is all there is" or "Leave me alone, I am fed up" – which could be interpreted as dissatisfaction with the status quo (see Wu this issue). However subtle the messages might appear to be, it was not lost on the authoritarian state, which responded by banning this fashion style. This example shows how dress can be used to elude political censorship, since fashion was generally not subject to political surveillance.

The final two articles in the special issue analyse the way women use fashion as a strategy for symbolic resistance and empowerment. Kyungja Kim and Bronwen Dalton propose the theory that women in North Korea use Western fashion and couture to challenge the socialist regime's feminine ideal. Everyday working fashion is deployed by professional middle-class women to demonstrate their own desire to embrace Western couture and project a cosmopolitan identity. Finally, the last contribution, by myself, analyses the way in which Filipino domestic workers in Singapore use fashionable dress on their day off to resist their employer's attempts to make them dowdy and unfeminine. The "Sunday Cinderella" transformations, which include beauty contests, challenge the house rules enforced by Singaporean employers that forbid their domestic workers to wear make-up, jewellery or nail polish, and require them to dress in modest simple clothing. Although these transformations are only for one day a week, photographs of the beauty contests and Facebook pages document the women's transformation from *provincianas* ("provincials", since many of them hail from the rural provinces in the Philippines) to fashionistas – modern, cosmopolitan women working in a First World country.

What all these articles clearly show is that dress is used as costume for the politics of presence – as "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985) – and to render the wearers and their demands visible. Resistance voiced through dress and fashion may appear subtle, and the experiences of empowerment may also be ephemeral, but the activists have learned how to express their agency through sartorial change. They use dress and fashion for dramatic effect – as part of the costume in the theatre of protest and/or to challenge cultural constructions of gender.

## Future research

Dress Studies is a relatively young field in general, and in Asian Studies in particular, so there is much room for more scholarship in all aspects of dress and identity – whether politics, religion, gender, class or ethnicity. In dress and gender studies, there is still a gap on the topic of non-heteronormative dress. But given the blossoming of gender and sexuality studies in recent years, one can assume that this gap will soon be filled. Since the Asian region boasts a plurality and diversity of sexualities and gender categories, especially in comparison with the Atlantic world (with one Indonesian language having terms for five genders, for example), there are fantastic possibilities for making original contributions to the topic of dress, gender and sexuality.

James C. Scott's theoretical book *The Art of Not Being Governed* discusses the way that groups living in the borderlands of the mainland Southeast Asian highlands (which he called "Zomia") who wanted to escape the strong arm of the state changed dress practices as part of the project of changing their identities as they moved across borders (Scott 2009). The way groups altered their appearances in the project of changing ethnic identities is also another potential angle that suits the interests of Asian Studies specialists, particularly those in border studies.

The role of the uniform in defining collective identities has been analysed in the context of the military uniform and the school uniform (Abler 1999, Parkins 2002, Craik 2005, Tynan / Godson 2019). In Asian Studies, while there is work on the introduction of Western military uniforms in Japan and Korea (Li 2010, Lee 2018, Nomura 2018) and the meaning of girls' school uniforms in contemporary Japan (McVeigh 2000, Kinsella 2002, Namba 2018), this topic is still largely neglected.

Here I am only touching on a few areas where there are glaring gaps in the field. For my final words, I want to suggest a way that Asian specialists can also contribute to the theoretical literature on dress, because I believe the Asian region to be a particular rich site for suggesting possible approaches for decentring Western fashion or "provincializing Europe", to borrow from Dipesh Chakrabarty (Chakrabarty 2000). It is always assumed that the West, particularly Europe, is the centre of fashion, as it is home to three of the five capital cities of fashion. But Europe is not the only inspiration or the only model of fashion for some populations in Asia. Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia look towards the Middle East as the centre of Islamic fashion, for example. Japan and Korea, as the centre of youth popular culture (J-Pop, K-Pop, anime, manga, television serials) are new trend-setters for the younger generation: J-Pop and K-Pop idols have now become celebrity role models for youth in China, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines, as well as in some parts of the West. By 2000, Vietnam had the largest market per capita for cosmetics, especially skin care, with Korean brands dominating the market (Tu 2019). The women who bought

these skin care products aim to be "white like Koreans", not white like Europeans: with South Korea's rise in economic power, it has become the epitome of modernity for Vietnamese (Tu 2019). In other words, the West is no longer the only barometer signifying modernity. The Asian context therefore has tremendous potential for scholars to analyse and interpret the histories of dress and the modernities that challenge the hegemony of Western-inspired global fashion.

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# "Fashion Is Changing All the Time, Everywhere" A Brief Overview of the Field of Fashion and Dress Studies

Mina Roces in conversation with Valerie Steele


Valerie Steele is director and chief curator of The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, where she has organized more than 25 exhibitions since 1997, including "A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk", "Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Color", and "Paris, Capital of Fashion". She is also the author or editor of more than 30 books, including *Women of Fashion*, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power*, and *The Berg Companion to Fashion*. In addition, she is founder and editor-in-chief of *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, the first scholarly journal in Fashion Studies.

**Keywords:** Fashion Studies, Dress Studies, Asian Studies, theory, dress, fashion, interview

Mina Roces: *Good morning, thank you for having agreed to this interview. We would like to do a brief overview of the field of Dress and Fashion Studies. You are one of the pioneers in this field and the editor of* Fashion Theory.

Valerie Steele: *Fashion Theory*, yes. The first peer reviewed scholarly magazine for Fashion Studies.

Mina Roces: *Now there are a couple more, but it is still considered the one that everyone wants to be published in. Could you tell us how* Fashion Theory *began, and what made you decide to start this journal at a time when Fashion Studies was not yet considered an established field in academia?*

Mina Roces, School of Humanities and Languages, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia; m.roces@unsw.edu.au. Valerie Steele, The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, USA. The interview was conducted on 19 October 2020 via Zoom and transcribed by Marie Wuscher, Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC), Germany. We would like to thank Marie Wuscher for the meticulous transcription efforts and support. The interview transcript has been edited and shortened for readability purposes.



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Valerie Steele: Well, it started almost by accident. I was at a conference of the Costume Society of America in 1996 and Kathryn Earle was also attending. She was then the managing director of Berg (Publishers), which was starting to publish books on fashion and dress history. She asked me if I would be on her board of advisors for the list of fashion books that they were publishing and I said: "Sure, I am happy to be on your board of advisors, but what you really should be publishing is a journal for Fashion Studies, because there are not that many books coming out and there is quite a bit of competition for them from other university presses. What you really need is a journal, because then people could publish their work in progress – if they had an early chapter or if they were stepping outside their normal subject matter to study fashion [...] – and this would be a place where scholars all around the world who were working on fashion could communicate with each other. We could have book reviews. We could have exhibition reviews." She went back to think about it and the next day she said: "Would you like to edit the magazine?" Of course, I agreed. But she was in England, and I was in New York, so it was all done by email. A year later the first issue came out and it was very exciting.

Mina Roces: *When was this?*

Valerie Steele: In 1997. It was exciting because the journal was peer reviewed, it was scholarly, interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, international. The very first issue included an article by Dorothy Ko about foot binding in China. We had an article by Irene Guenther about "Nazi Chic". I knew the photographer Roxanne Lowit and I asked her if we could use one of her photographs of the three supermodels Naomi Campbell, Christy Turlington and Linda Evangelista on the cover. We got a lot of press. People were surprised and interested that there was a scholarly journal about fashion, because the popular idea was that fashion was a very superficial topic that scholars avoided. This had certainly been the response that I got when I was in graduate school in the early 1980s: that fashion was considered a totally frivolous topic. And interestingly, even by the 1990s that was still the case.

Mina Roces: *And even now, some people still think it's frivolous.*

Valerie Steele: Yes, well. There was a young graduate student at Columbia University in the Sociology Department, Yuniya Kawamura, who wanted to write about fashion in modern society. And, despite the fact that Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel were sociologists, her professor said that this was not a scholarly topic. When the first issue of *Fashion Theory* came out, she

showed it to her professor: "Look, there is a scholarly journal, and that proves it is a valid topic for a PhD." They backed down, I was on her dissertation committee, and she went on to have quite a career writing about fashion.[1] There was really a desire for this field.

Mina Roces: *The journal, now, is interdisciplinary. But what was the approach to Dress and Fashion Studies at that time? Was it usually only anthropologists who engaged in this field?*

Valerie Steele: You had some historians, sociologists, art historians, anthropologists, but everyone was very isolated. *Fashion Theory* was important because it provided a place where they could encounter each other. Fashion writing has tended to be primarily descriptive; it was less analytical. That is why I came up with the idea of calling it Fashion Theory. I found that title when I was doing research in the Bibliothèque Nationale – there was a 19th century fashion magazine called *Fashion Théorie* which was an interesting mix of Franglais, the word "fashion" in English and then "theory" in French. I thought this was perfect. My approach to fashion had always been to see it as an embodied phenomenon. I wanted to combine dress, body and culture, as I believed that dress and body were inextricably connected. That it wasn't just about the body, but included also the self, who you are, your identity.

In 1985 when my PhD dissertation was published as *Fashion and Eroticism*, Elizabeth Wilson wrote *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. A bit earlier, Ann Hollander had published *Seeing through Clothes*. In France, in the 1980s you had male historians, such as Daniel Roche and Philippe Perrot, who were writing about 18th and 19th century fashion in Paris. So, there were definitely a few scholars, but they were isolated and Fashion Studies didn't have any place in the academy.

Mina Roces: *I remember that even in the early 2000s it was difficult for me to get into a conference in London with a paper on dress; it was rejected. I also noticed that the field was Eurocentric except for a few exceptions on China and Japan. Most studies were on European dress. Am I right? If scholars were doing research on dress and fashion, they were usually writing about European dress, not even American.*

1 See for example Yuniya Kawamura's books *Doing Research in Fashion and Dress: An Introduction to Qualitative Methods* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), *Fashion-ology. An Introduction to Fashion Studies* (2nd edition, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), *Sneakers: Fashion, Gender, and Subculture* (Dress, Body, Culture) (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), and *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012).

Valerie Steele: You certainly had scholars in America writing about American fashion history, but the field overall was quite Euro-American, that's true. Though there had always been some scholars working on Asian dress and fashion history. Back during the Cultural Revolution, there was Shen Congwen, an eminent professor in Beijing, who wrote a history of Chinese dress, as that was a safe topic to write about. He could publish on this topic without getting into political trouble. And, of course there was Akiko Fukai in Kyoto, who was writing and putting on exhibitions that were quite sophisticated. But there wasn't much work being done by European or American scholars on Asian fashion and Asian dress. I think that was partly because of the stereotype that Asian dress has been unchanging for centuries. This idea existed for many centuries in the West. Montesquieu, for example, talked about unchanging Chinese dress and this interpretation just kept being repeated over and over. That was one of the perceptions that I wanted to disprove when I did my exhibition and book on *China Chic*. You only have to look at Chinese sculptures from different epochs to see that the clothes that people were wearing in sculpture or in painting changed. Fashion was changing all the time. It was astonishing to notice that there was so little awareness of the world of dress and fashion in other cultures. So, yes, the field was predominantly Eurocentric.

Mina Roces: *When would you say the field took off?*

Valerie Steele: With the global turn, eventually Asian topics took off. That was an important development towards looking at the global world of dress rather than only the American or European. I would say that it really took off at the very end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. Suddenly there were more people studying dress. There were new possibilities to get jobs as professors teaching dress or fashion history. The popularity of fashion exhibitions exploded. There was the hope that you could curate an exhibition, even though realistically there were only a few jobs in the museum world for dress specialists. Still, scholars started to feel there was at least a possibility that they could find a professional place for themselves. There was still not really any home in the academy. Very few Fashion Studies departments existed at major universities, except in a few art schools such as the University of the Arts London, where you could do a Master's or PhD degree in Fashion Studies or Fashion Curation.

Mina Roces: *And these are still mainly postgraduate programmes, right? Because there are very few courses on Fashion History or Fashion Studies or Dress History in most universities.*

Valerie Steele: Few, yes. There might be one or two [courses] depending on the interest of a particular professor. If there is someone in the Art History department, for example, you might find a course there, but there was no established or recognised field of Fashion Studies or Dress Studies. When I was at Yale University in the late 1970s and 1980s, I stubbornly wrote a fashion paper in every single class. If I did a course, for instance, on 18th century England, I examined the character of the Macaroni fashion; if I was taking a class on the Social History of Impressionism, I focused on paintings about fashion. Whatever the main topic of the course was, I turned it into fashion.

Mina Roces: *Should we distinguish between Dress Studies and Fashion Studies?*

Valerie Steele: Well, I'm not sure how helpful it is ultimately to distinguish between them. I would like to hear from you how you perceive the difference.

Mina Roces: *For me, Fashion Studies is part of Dress Studies. Dress Studies is everything about clothing and adornment, as well as bodily practices. But I see Fashion Studies as more about dress styles that change over time. I guess I am defining Fashion Studies in opposition to studies on national dress. The study of the history of couture and cultural constructions of luxury that change through time and is connected to changing concepts of status. I would locate Fashion Studies in that space, but there is a clear overlap and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the two.*

Valerie Steele: The problem with distinguishing between them that way is that fashion is not simply a European, Euro-American phenomenon or a Western phenomenon. It's quite clear that there are examples of fashion in non-Western cultures that go back as far as 8th century Heian Japan. So, the distinction that way I think is problematic. Also, it's tended to be Dress Studies being more associated with certain fields like Anthropology or Object Studies, like Museum Studies, and then fashion being more Cultural Studies, or in the museum world more about flashy shows with lots of technology. I think it is more important to view Fashion Studies as a continuum, because there are no clear breaks between fashion and dress. Of course, you are right in a sense: fashion can be considered a subcategory of dress. When I started *Fashion Theory*, I defined fashion as "the cultural construction of the embodied identity". From the beginning on I would use "fashion" like a verb – you are fashioning yourself – so I included dress and adornment as part of the study of fashion.

Mina Roces: *I agree. If you use "fashion" as a verb, then dress and adornment are interchangeable. Then, "fashioning" the body doesn't have to do with changes in season, luxury or changing times. And the old discussion of whether a kind of middle class is needed to call a certain dress a "fashion" becomes less important. What do you think were the key debates in the study of dress and fashion? I would instantly think of the relation between dress and the body, and then the shift to performativity and performing identity through dress.*

Valerie Steele: In a way the changing themes in Dress and Fashion Studies have changed according to fashions in the Humanities and in the Social Sciences. Different theories appeared about how to approach fashion: one was the debate on "object versus idea" – are you viewing fashion as a material object? As a concept? As a system? We have certainly seen a movement away from the chronological histories of dress to a more thematic-based approach, to studies that are more analytic rather than descriptive. Many more theories suggest analysing fashion through different lenses: the lens of gender, of sexual identity, of class, of racial aspects, of decolonisation, certainly also the lens of ethnic or national identity, looking at, for example, Japanese or Chinese fashions.

Globalisation has been a major trend in recent years and here of course Asian scholars have had an immense impact. Japanese scholars have shown that what we would call fashion today existed at least since the Heian period, that is, since about 800 CE. Every season the fashion changed, Heian aristocrats could not wear the previous season's clothes or they would be laughed at. It wasn't so much the silhouette of the clothing that changed so abruptly, but its colours, patterns, etc. And Chinese historians, too, demonstrated that fashion existed across different dynasties in China. We can see that Indian textiles travelled all over the world, globally transforming fashion from South East Asia to England and beyond. These insights forced Western scholars to admit that fashion was not a purely Western phenomenon. I think that this was immensely important, providing a base for other scholars to start looking at the patterns of what's going on with fashion systems in all parts of the world.

Mina Roces: *Has the Asian context made a major contribution in terms of rethinking how Western scholars approach fashion?*

Valerie Steele: A huge influence. Take another example, the introduction of Western fashion to the court of Japan under the Meiji regime, and how it evolved later to the fashion of middle-class urban Tokyo in the 1920s. Young people started wearing Western fashion. That confrontation between Western dress and Japanese dress encouraged dress scholars to find ways of examining

hybrid dress and the way societies like Japan indigenised Western fashion in the project of modernisation. In studying this, Asian scholars have had a tremendous influence on the global study of fashion. Or just think of the huge fashion weeks that are organised in Tokyo or Shanghai or Beijing nowadays. I am really looking forward to seeing more studies of this kind, for example, in Korean Studies, in South East Asian Studies, there is still a lot more work to be done.

Mina Roces: *Yes, definitely, Dress Studies is relatively new even though it has existed a long time in terms of studies of textiles and costume as material objects.*

Valerie Steele: I remember well a big conference on Fashion Studies in 1997 in Manchester, England. There was almost a battle between the object-based curators and the theory-based academics. The curators complained about the use of special terminology by the new Fashion Studies scholars. You clearly noticed the differences between object-based and theory-based approaches. Everywhere throughout the conference, there were huge tensions. More recently, however, curators have been organising exhibitions based on academic scholarship, such as "Black Fashion Designers" and "From Sidewalk to Catwalk", a pioneering show on street style in London.

Mina Roces: *So you think it is important then to have both, the academic world and the exhibition world working together?*

Valerie Steele: I think exhibitions are very important, because many more people visit them than read academic books and articles. Even the colour of mannequins is significant. Most are white but you can hire mannequins in a wide variety of skin colours, from pale, tan to dark black. We deliberately use a range of different-coloured mannequins for all of our shows to avoid the impression that fashion is "just something for rich white people". This is just one example of how the way exhibitions are presented can be very exclusionary without anyone thinking about it at all. And of course, such experiences in exhibitions spill over to academic research as well. Now, with Black Lives Matter growing, there is also a growing interest in Black fashion, and questions such as decolonising the museum and decolonising fashion have become important issues right now. For too long, I think, we've looked at fashion primarily as a field of visual culture. […] We've looked so much at consumers, but not so much at making fashion and the issues connected to production. Sustainability, too, has become an enormous topic. I receive lots of papers at *Fashion Theory* about sustainability and fashion.

Mina Roces: *True, ethical fashion is a new thing. In addition, scholars have started to write about the sewing itself, about the people who actually sew their clothes. […] Are there any kinds of research gaps you would like to see filled in the near future?*

Valerie Steele: Well, I think a truly global fashion history would be really good. My long-term aspirations would be that all of these regional in-depth studies lead to a truly global history. So that it wouldn't just be a few pages about, for example, China, and otherwise mostly Western fashion history but that all the different research findings would be integrated and we would see much better what was happening, an exchange of cultural ideas all along. There have been a few great exhibitions on that but there is still a lot more work to do. Then, there are a lots of small gaps. I am starting to get quite a lot of articles from African scholars, which is really, really great. What is interesting is, oddly enough, we still don't get many articles from French scholars, even though we get them from Chinese and Korean scholars and other people whose first language is other than English. So that's kind of odd. And of course, there is a lot of good research coming out of Russia; there is even a Russian edition of *Fashion Theory*.

Mina Roces: *Certainly, Russia is a very rich site for Fashion Studies. What do you think are the biggest challenges in doing Fashion Studies?*

Valerie Steele: I think the most striking challenge is that there is still no home for Fashion Studies in the academy. And that means that scholars continue to have a hard time. They may not be lucky enough to have a job that enables them to do research on their subject. There still aren't so many jobs for researchers who are doing Fashion or Dress Studies. So, I think, that is a real issue. […]

Mina Roces: *Now, if at the end of this interview we turn to the focus of this special issue, which is on politics and dress, what comes to your mind?*

Valerie Steele: Thinking of politics and dress … I first have to think of the colour pink – I remember for example photographs in the *Washington Post* depicting thousands of women at the women's march in Washington, DC, all wearing pink pussy hats. When I did my show "Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty Powerful Color"[2], I also included pictures of pussy hats in the book and

2 The exhibition was shown from September 2018 to January 2019 at the Museum at FIT, New York. For the accompanying exhibition catalogue see *Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Colour*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2018.

the show. Politically it was clearly a message of resistance for American women directed against Donald Trump and his remark that he grabbed women by the pussy. When news came out that protestors were planning to wear these pink hats, Petula Dvorak, a feminist journalist at the *Washington Post*, wrote an article that said: "Please sisters, back away from the pink. This will make a serious subject seem to be frivolous and girly."[3] We have already seen pink being used by gay men in the 1980s. Taking it from the Nazis and then making it into a symbol of gay pride and gay activism. Since 2006, we have as well the Gulabi ["Pink"] Gang in North India and their pink sari movement, a women's movement against male violence and violence from upper caste people.

Mina Roces: *Yes, that's true.*

Valerie Steele: They said that they chose pink because other colours were already occupied, like orange is associated with the Hindu nationalist party BJP.

Mina Roces: *And green is generally associated with the Muslims.*

Valerie Steele: That's it, green is associated with the Muslims, exactly. Although pink was traditionally a unisex colour in India, obviously even the very poor low-caste women know at some level that globally pink has become a colour symbolic of women's protests. Now, we have seen protest clothes used in many contexts – from Afro-centric clothes used in the 1960s and 70s as part of restoring dignity to African Americans in the civil rights movement in the United States, to umbrellas as a symbol for the democratic protests in Hong Kong. There were various "Colour Revolutions" around the world. But I think that their usefulness varies considerably depending on the relative degree of freedom of expression in any given country, [...] obviously in an authoritarian and totalitarian governed country the protests will just be crushed. In this case using special "activism" dress is just like painting a target on yourself.

Mina Roces: *That's right. Certainly, in authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia activists have used colour-coded clothing as a "uniform" to symbolise their cause and unite the members of their group. A couple of examples include the red shirt and yellow shirt protesters in Thailand, and the yellow revolution that deposed Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. But, as you said, a colour code also makes you vulnerable. It is a common cliché to say that fashion is political. But it is also true the other way round – that political actors use fashion to em-*

3 See Petula Dvorak (2017): The Women's March Needs Passion and Purpose, Not Pink Pussy Hats. *Washington Post*, 12 January 2017.

*power themselves – whether they are in political power or whether they are marginalised. Dress can actually be a very powerful way to communicate symbolic messages in visual form. […] There is still the common perception in both society and academia that fashion is associated only with elites who use it to display wealth and status. But as this special issue demonstrates, fashion has been mobilised by oppressed groups as part of the costume and ideology of their resistance. At the same time, we hope to underscore the point that fashion is very important to every ordinary person – and can be deployed for subtle forms of defiance, as weapons of the weak to restore dignity to the oppressed and exploited. We hope that in showing that the issue of what to wear is also about politics, resistance and empowerment, then maybe dress and fashion will become better accepted as a field worth studying. […]*

Valerie Steele: Thank you so much. That was fun, this was a great interview.

Mina Roces: *I am glad you enjoyed it. Thank you very much.*

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# Activist Styling: Fashioning Domestic Worker Identities in Indonesia

Mary Austin

## Abstract

This article investigates the use of dress by Indonesia's domestic worker movement as a means of resisting gendered political disregard and legal exclusion. JALA PRT, Indonesia's National Network for Domestic Worker Advocacy, founded in 2004 and spearheaded by feminist activists, supports the development of domestic worker unions. From the outset, it has campaigned for an Indonesian domestic workers law, and, since 2011, for the ratification of ILO Convention 189 (C189) on decent work for domestic workers. Analysing a series of demonstrations staged from 2009 onwards, this article argues that the use of elements of a housemaid's uniform as a costume within a contentious politics of presence has helped keep domestic worker rights on the political agenda, fashioned workers into activists and created a collective history and new identity for Indonesia's domestic workers as members of an emergent domestic worker class.

**Keywords:** Indonesia, PRT, *pembantu*, domestic workers, uniform, costume, ILO Convention 189, JALA PRT, demonstrations, politics of dress

On a humid Friday evening in November 2016, twelve or so women were gathered in a tiny one-bedroom house in a densely packed neighbourhood in south Jakarta. They were domestic workers, often referred to in Indonesia as "household helpers" or *pembantu rumah tangga*, usually shortened to the simpler *pembantu* or "PRT". For themselves, they preferred the term worker – *pekerja* – to *pembantu*: as workers they could be seen as contributing to Indonesia's economy and claim employment rights. That evening the focus for discussion was the minimum wage.

Already interested in domestic worker demonstrations, I asked some of the attendees about their experiences of joining street action coordinated by the National Network for Domestic Worker Advocacy, JALA PRT. One group member, unknowingly sowing the seeds of this article, spoke of the movement's creative use of costumes and props. As did many other activists I interviewed, she mentioned the red or blue checked cotton napkins or *serbet* that

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PRT protesters and their allies wore tied as headscarves as a visual marker of JALA's political identity. "We feel proud to wear the *serbet*, not embarrassed, it feels like a professional uniform", she said.[1]

One might anticipate embarrassment at putting a *serbet* on one's head. The "kitchen cloth" or *serbet dapur* was, after all, an item used by millions of Indonesians every day for dusting, drying dishes or wiping up spills. However, it was also instantly recognisable, I was told, as the badge of a "helper" because of its regular appearance in a popular TV comedy featuring a male domestic worker often seen with a *serbet* worn over his shoulder or in his pocket.[2] Cheap and easy to hand out to protesters, when combined with an apron and worn during demonstrations, the *serbet* became a conspicuous element of a stereotypical "maid's uniform", catching the public eye. Answering journalists' questions about its use provided an opportunity for Lita Anggraini – JALA's national coordinator since its formation in 2004 – and other spokespersons to explain that the *serbet* is one of the PRT's "tools of the trade", thus highlighting their core message that domestic work stands equal to, and is "as noble as", other occupations (Saragih 2010).

This article tells the hitherto overlooked story of the use of dress and performance to advance claims for the legal protection of domestic workers in Indonesia. In 2008 the International Labour Organisation (ILO) began consulting member states on a possible Domestic Workers Convention. Between 2009 and 2015, buoyed by this decision and the adoption of the convention (C189) in June 2011, JALA and its allies staged a series of demonstrations in Jakarta and other large cities.[3] By examining the politics and changing semiotics of dress as evident in this campaign, I move away from analyses of uniform as a signifier of gendered technologies of servitude (Rudnyckyi 2004). Instead, I focus on dress as a symbol of resistance and empowerment and as an aspect of identity formation. Worn in the square, street and parliamentary precinct – spaces crucial in the "micro-dynamics" of contentious politics – domestic worker outfits and accoutrements contributed to the production and projection of PRT as "activist citizens" willing to "make a scene" (Isin 2009: 379, Ataç et al. 2016: 536). Based on a discursive analysis of a selection of photographs, associated texts and the comments of participants collected during a larger PhD research project, I argue that the movement's use of "uniform" represented more than

1 Fieldnote, Jakarta, 12 February 2016.

2 Interview with domestic worker union member, Yogyakarta, 24 February 2016.

3 States ratifying C189 must protect the basic rights, and fundamental employment rights, of anyone doing domestic work in "an employment relationship". Such workers should enjoy fair conditions commensurate with those of other workers in relation to contracts, working hours, overtime, rest periods, the minimum wage, social security/maternity benefits, annual leave, health and safety and access to dispute resolution. Special provisions should guarantee workers one day off a week, protect against discrimination, violence or harassment, and enable participation in collective bargaining. Regulations should govern the employment of children and live-in workers, in-kind benefits, registration of employment agencies and repatriation for migrant workers (ILO 2011a). On 14 June 2011, two days before the vote on the Convention, Indonesia's then-president pledged his nation's support (ILO 2011b).

a reshaping of helpers into modern professionals. Rather, by using uniform as costume, the movement created its own version of "style activism" (Tulloch 2019), promoted its agendas and contributed to the creation of a collective history and new identity for Indonesia's PRT as members of an emerging, transnational, domestic worker class.

In connecting costume and class formation, I draw on Rina Agarwala's analysis of the emergence of distinct patterns of organisation amongst informal workers – those outside standard employment relationships whose pay and conditions are generally unregulated. Providing cheap, flexible labour, these workers underpin capital accumulation and the reproduction of labour, thus occupying a crucial position in contemporary class structures. Often excluded from strike or collective bargaining mechanisms, members of this class are winning concessions by associating their demands with broader causes such as women's or human rights (Agarwala 2013: 7–10). By staging non-violent protests or "public dramas" directed towards the state as much as against employers, informal workers also assert their rights as national or global citizens (Chun / Agarwala 2016: 641–44). Similarly, Stefan Rother (2017), discussing migrant domestic worker activism in Hong Kong, identifies a performance element in class formation. Workers there have directed class protests – such as their challenge to salary deductions – towards their home governments, chanting demands in front of consulate offices. Demonstrating alongside migrants from different countries, domestic workers began to envision themselves as members of an "emerging" but distinctly "transnational" class (Rother 2017: 970). Building on these insights, this article asks whether, and how, costume uniforms used as part of public performances and protests inside Indonesia have served as sartorial shorthand, announcing the arrival of a new kind of PRT – a domestic worker with demands.

In what follows, after a short overview of the work of JALA PRT and a brief discussion of uniforms and social status in general in Indonesia, I examine the movement's use of costume and props as illustrated in a selection of photographs taken at some of the thirty street protests and performances I found evidence of staged between 2009 and 2015.[4] Analysing costume chronologically, I suggest, reveals how demonstrations created a disruptive assemblage of the female domestic worker and offered the PRT new ways of imagining themselves.

4 Materials were collected using the internet search terms *unjuk rasa pekerja rumah tangga* ("demonstration of domestic workers") and *mogok makan PRT* ("domestic workers' hunger strike") as starting points.

## JALA PRT – Empowering domestic workers

The staging of protests has been but one part of what I have described elsewhere as JALA PRT's "feminist politics of presence" (Austin 2020). JALA first appeared on the political scene in 2004, when activists from domestic worker organisations joined with prominent feminist, women's and children's rights NGOs and legal aid foundations to create a loose network. Network members agreed to cooperate to advance domestic workers' rights. From its beginnings in 1995 in Yogyakarta as a small NGO named Rumpun Tjoet Njak Dien (RTND) after one of Indonesia's nationalist heroines, and with its roots in the feminist and student activism that mushroomed on university campuses in the late 1980s, JALA activists have analysed the exploitation and abuse of domestic workers in terms of gender injustice, class and the legacies of slavery and feudalism (RTND 2008). Its mission has been remarkably consistent. Determined to bring domestic worker issues into the public domain, activists have sought to establish a presence in neighbourhoods (and more recently in apartment blocks) through fostering domestic worker organisations and unions and running domestic worker schools.

The present coordinator, Lita Anggraini (who was sent by her parents to Gadjah Mada university with the expectation of becoming a diplomat or civil servant but who became a feminist and started working with PRT after hearing details of a case of violent abuse in East Java), was involved in the opening of the first of these schools in Yogyakarta in 2003. At that time, Anggraini was working with RTND. She continued to do so after JALA was established, later moving to Jakarta and setting up domestic worker schools there. Now renamed "Schools of Insight", JALA's model of domestic worker education has been lauded by the ILO as an example of best practice (ILO 2018a).

While the curriculum has changed over time, core principles have remained: teaching should build on PRT experiences and promulgate gender equality. Classes aim to enhance PRT life and vocational skills on the one hand, and to build organising, negotiating, campaigning, lobbying and leadership skills on the other, so that PRT can change their conditions and challenge embedded cultures of deference (JALA PRT/ILO-PROMOTE 2017). Indeed, one of my last meetings with Lita Anggraini was at a large expatriate house in South Jakarta one Sunday in late 2016 when she stood in front of almost a hundred newly enrolled members of the Jakarta-based Sapu Lidi domestic workers' union, explaining employment rights.

Presence in communities was a precursor to presence on the streets. As one organiser put it, "before you get PRT going on demonstrations, first you must educate them about human rights and women's rights so they understand why there's going to be a protest or march".[5] Another explained: "When there's going

5 Interview with an activist/teacher at domestic worker school, Yogyakarta, 25 February 2016.

to be an *aksi* [demonstration] I choose two or three potential activists to join us […] it's a big thing […] if they choose for themselves, that helps us develop them into activists for the future."[6] Furthermore, if they joined a local group, individuals were taught to negotiate work contracts and resolve disputes with employers; in extremis, with the help of legal aid organisations in the JALA network, they could take employers to court.

Case-based knowledge provided the evidence JALA needed to make its presence felt in policymaking through advocacy, legal drafting, lobbying and research. Foregrounding workers' voices, activists have used the press, radio, TV, magazine advertising, theatre, social media and, most recently, online seminars to counter stereotypes of PRT as either poorly-educated, submissive but gratefully dependent quasi-kin or as potential thieves prone to sexual promiscuity (Austin 2017). A key strategy has been building alliances, initially with women's rights, human rights and children's rights NGOs and subsequently with unions. As one founding member told me, "the more organisations that can join JALA, the more powerful it can be".[7]

From 2006 onwards, when Lita Anggraini and Susi Apriyani (then chair of Indonesia's first domestic worker trade union) attended the inaugural international meeting of domestic worker activists in Amsterdam, JALA has maintained a high profile in what is now the International Domestic Workers Federation as well as with the ILO. International pressure, insider contacts, demonstrations and making a lot of noise, I was told, were crucial in getting a hearing from politicians or officials. Once inside meeting rooms, however, it was knowledge accumulated through JALA's politics of presence, most notably that held by Lita Anggraini, who "could always follow up questions with all the data", that, over time, began to change minds.[8]

Existing studies explain why the movement has failed so far (despite sustained efforts) to achieve its legislative goals and suggest ways forward (Eddyono et al. 2016, Gastaldi et al. 2017, Jordhus-Lier 2017).[9] Such analysis is pertinent. Indeed, at the time of writing, Indonesia's Parliament, the DPR (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat* or "Peoples Representative Council") was still discussing a draft law for the protection of domestic workers, or *Rancangan Undang-Undang Perlindungan PRT* (RUU PPRT). Yet pre-pandemic, there were at least 4.2 million PRT inside Indonesia, and perhaps the same number overseas – a significant share of a global total of some 60 million (ILO 2018b, Peng 2016). COVID-19

6 Interview with an organiser of neighbourhood groups for PRT, Jakarta, 27 July 2015.

7 Interview with the then director of the Indonesian Women's Association for Justice (LBH APIK), Jakarta, 31 July 2015.

8 Interviews with activists from Kalyanamitra, Solidaritas Perempuan and JALA PRT, July 2015.

9 Reasons for failure cited include: patriarchal cultures; the challenge of organising PRT; limited resources; self-interest of politicians, officials, trade unionists and activists dependent on low-paid PRT; size and complexity of the country; suspicion of feminism and Western rights-based activism; fragmentation of women's and unionist politics; Indonesia's parliamentary system and "money politics" and over-reliance on middle-class NGOs.

exposed (again) the precarity and gendered inequalities of paid domestic work: workers have been dismissed, had their hours reduced and been told to take unpaid leave. Others perforce shouldered increased workloads as employers' families spent more time at home. Some have been stigmatised as carriers of the virus (ILO 2020). The majority lack legal entitlements; in ASEAN, for example, in January 2022, only the Philippines had ratified Convention C189. Despite dire circumstances, PRT in Indonesia supported each other and challenged exclusion from emergency measures – testament to the activism, including that examined in this article, that has built class and gender solidarities over time.

## Work uniforms and status in Indonesia

My informant's pride in a "professional uniform" reflects a belief prevalent in Indonesia that work uniforms signal financial security and higher social status. After the Japanese occupation and the Indonesian revolution, when a shortage of textiles led people to resort to making clothes out of sacking, civil service uniforms served as the model par excellence of work dress as a marker of distinction (Schulte Nordtholt 1997). Rapid expansion of the civil service during President Suharto's New Order (1968–1998) meant that tailored khaki jackets with trademark civil service buttons and the blue batik shirts worn by civil servants for formal occasions became familiar sights. These uniforms embodied state-promoted values of modernity, discipline and order, and marked the attainment of middle-class respectability (Moser 2008). Only "full-status" civil servants could wear the blue batik which came with the promise of dependents' allowances, access to loans and patronage, a pension and the possibility of making extra money through various means (Tidey 2012). Furthermore, for much of the New Order, a woman wearing civil service uniform was ascribed professional "status and authority" outside the office as well as within; her family, likewise, gained prestige (Jones 2010: 272, Minza 2014: 123).

Women employed as factory operatives or shop assistants have also valued the distinction uniform can confer. Johannes Nicholaas Warouw (2004) found that young women who had migrated to work in the industrialised area of Tangerang (situated to the west of Jakarta) took pains to appear in public in carefully laundered company outfits and relished doing so. Uniforms befitted their sense of being "official" workers, a cut above the agricultural worker, market trader or homeworker. Combined with blue jeans and fashionable footwear, factory uniforms materialised modernity and signified new-found freedoms. Furthermore, Warouw's informants described themselves as *karyawan*, a designation once reserved for those in the higher echelons of the civil service but used by the end of the New Order to denote educated and skilled employees,

rather than the more common terms for "worker" such as *buruh* or *pekerja*. Suzanne Naafs (2012: 55–56), interviewing sales assistants in West Java, reported that some (though not those brought up in religiously conservative homes) experienced their uniforms as fun: in uniform they could spend time in the lively, modern spaces of the mall without being labelled "naughty" or *nakal*. Additionally, since obtaining a sales job required a high school certificate, uniforms broadcast their wearers' aspirational membership of the (lower) middle classes – a step up from the position of "servants, babysitters or market traders" – even though sales work was often insecure and poorly paid.

Such pleasure in a uniform stands in stark contrast to the picture presented in ethnographies detailing the experiences of Southeast Asia's migrant domestic workers. In those descriptions, workers recall feeling humiliated and resentful at being compelled to dress in certain ways. As memorably characterised by Pei-Chia Lan in *Global Cinderellas* – and further explored by Mina Roces in this volume – some of these women exchange "deferential aprons" for more flamboyant outfits on days off as a means of empowerment (Lan 2006: 166–70). Prospective workers have had to follow strict dress codes, wear minimal make-up or cut their hair short as they undergo training corralled in "camps" en route to placements. Such regimes produce a customised, docile, and desexualised product for the marketplace (Killias 2018). While few employers in destination countries require women to wear uniforms around the house, many impose dress and hairstyle codes (Lyons 2005, Williams 2005).

Employment agencies feature images of pristinely clad uniformed workers on their websites. These project "maids" as modern professionals and promote the uniform as a first-line of defence against employers' fears that "attractive" workers may become pregnant or arouse sexual jealousies in the home (Killias 2018). Workers, on the other hand, may accept rigid controls to keep their jobs or avoid harassment, enduring the stigma of being seen as a servant (Hierofani 2020). Some have seen dressing in uniform as akin to donning armour in a "battle" (*perjuangan*) to survive – part of "a politics of place" in which they perform the role of cheerful and competent subservience (Williams 2005: 411–12). Or, to borrow the phrase used by Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez in relation to domestic work in Europe, women have had to embrace the twin metaphors of "the mop and the smile" even while their bodies were being "inscribed" as inferior (2010: 11–12).

I found little research documenting examples of domestic workers in Indonesia being required to wear a uniform. Indeed, widely held notions of domestic workers as "one of the family" and the propensity of Indonesian families to keep PRT wages low might make the practice unlikely (Noor 2017). In Yogyakarta, a foundation that trained workers in child or elder care from the mid-1990s onwards issued them with uniforms "as guidance to employers" – an indication that uniforms were not commonly worn (Muryanti et al. 2015).

Gita Nasution, researching in Jakarta in 2015, noted a growing presence of uniformed "babysitters" wearing white, nursing-type outfits in airports, shopping, malls and at school gates. Workers were divided about uniforms: some spoke of them with pride, comparing themselves to civil servants, further up the hierarchy than untrained childminders and PRT. Others felt uniforms denoted subservience and marked them in public as working class – still "domestic workers" despite their aspirational goals (Nasution 2020: 67–68).

Uniforms, in these readings, signified transaction and transformation. Susan Hardy and Anthony Corones (2017) suggest a similar duality in the semiotics of the white-aproned uniforms and caps that came to denote the modern, medically trained nurse across the British empire.[10] In return for accepting the dress codes and constraints of the training school and ward, women "purchased respectability and admission to the public sphere" (ibid.: 541). At the same time, uniforms were transformational. Projecting nurses as professional, disciplined, respectable and trustworthy, uniforms shaped the gaze and behaviour of patients and the public. Nursing uniforms were character-forming in an interior sense as well: as they donned their uniforms, nurses practised and internalised new individual and collective identities. Moreover, the shared sartorial resistance to outworn embodied identities which later led to the "shift to scrubs for nursing wear" (ibid.: 545–46) engendered camaraderie, an analysis that illuminates exactly certain aspects of JALA PRT's use of domestic worker dress.

However, the uniforms that PRT donned for demonstrations in Jakarta were not what they wore to work every day. As protesters they were, to use a distinction drawn by performance scholar Andy Lavender, "costumed", but not "uniformed" – they used dress to theatricalise their demands and draw attention to the "back story" or "intertextuality" that costumes bring (2019: 9–10). In the following analysis of three stages of JALA's campaigning, therefore, I consider the language and ideas expressed on placards, in press releases, in interviews and in the use of objects as accoutrements, as well as shifts in the styling of dress.

## Fashioning a PRT street style: 2009–2011

On 15 February 2009, 14 February 2010, and again on 14 February 2011, JALA and its allies staged demonstrations to publicise a date they had designated as "National Domestic Workers Day". Events were held in several cities but those in Jakarta were widely reported and are therefore the focus here. At these protests activists used elements of a "maid's uniform" to establish a strong

10 Photographs show Javanese trainee nurses in the Dutch East Indies wearing similar long white aprons over cotton dresses (Hesselink 2015: 149, 161).

visual presence and media-savvy activist street style that positioned PRT as belonging to the family of the nation and as worthy of legal protection, with overseas workers feted as economic heroines. Utilising iconic locations, these events incorporated the positive values inherent in the trope of the uniformed worker and added legitimacy through association with Indonesia's protest traditions.

JALA had chosen 15 February in commemoration of the death of a fourteen-year-old child domestic worker named Sunarsih in 2001. Working in a household in Surabaya (the provincial capital of East Java), Sunarsih had been subject to sustained abuse: shockingly, the employer, who had a history of violence towards PRT, received a mere two-year prison sentence (Sheppard 2009: 16). PRT in East Java and Yogyakarta had been holding rallies on or around 15 February since 2007, but in 2009 activists seized the opportunity offered by consultations surrounding an ILO convention to demonstrate in the capital. Establishing a pattern of annual remembrances reflected a tradition associated with Marsinah, the young woman factory worker infamously tortured, raped and murdered in East Java in 1993 while taking a leading role in industrial action (Weix 2002). The Marsinah case had become a national scandal; for Lita Anggraini, speaking to assembled journalists, abuse and underpayment of PRT was similarly scandalous –"our problem" she averred – since "so many Indonesian families" employ domestic workers in their homes (Sabarini 2009).

## "We are workers" – National Domestic Workers Day 2009

JALA chose one of Jakarta's most iconic locations, the Hotel Indonesia Roundabout, for the 2009 Domestic Workers Day demonstration. Constructed by President Sukarno when Indonesia hosted the Asian Games in 1962 and used by President Suharto for state-sponsored celebrations, the roundabout had been the site of some of the huge student-led pro-democracy demonstrations of May 1998 that led to Suharto's downfall. With fountains, trees, iconic buildings and the unmistakable "Welcome Monument" as backdrop, the site presented photojournalists the opportunity to catch a quick story and shoot arresting pictures of even small-scale protests (Padawangi 2013: 858). For women's rights activists, the roundabout had additional resonance as the place of the feminist-led "Voice of Concerned Mothers" (*Suara Ibu Peduli*) or SIP demonstration staged in February 1998, the first of the protests presaging the end of authoritarian rule. That demonstration won extensive media coverage and public sympathy through its strategic emphasis on motherhood and the domestic sphere and its deployment of peaceful performative elements such as the reciting of prayers or distribution of flowers and milk powder to motorists and passers-by (Arivia / Subono 2017: 16–19).

National Domestic Workers Day 2009 likewise focused on peaceful performativity. Around one hundred PRT and 200 supporters were reported to


Figure 1: Women from the Women's School in Ciliwung, South Jakarta, lined up at the Hotel Indonesia Roundabout, 15 February 2009 (photo by JALA PRT / Azizh J. P.)

Figure 2: National Domestic Workers Day 2009 (photo by JALA PRT / Azizh J. P.)

have attended (Sabarini 2009). In press releases and interviews Lita Anggraini presented the protesters' demands. They wanted the government to declare 15 February an official holiday for PRT and guarantee domestic workers one day off a week. They wanted Parliament to resume debate on the draft Domestic Workers Bill that JALA had promoted for discussion in 2004. Lastly, they urged the public and employers to view PRT as essential workers entitled to state protection from workplace abuse. During the event, PRT posed for photographs, gave speeches, paraded around the roundabout with giant painted placards and banners, read stories of abuse and performed a play about the life of a PRT. Throughout, PRT handed leaflets to motorists who slowed down to watch the scene.

However, by 2009, some Jakarta residents were inured to the sight of daily demonstrations (Padawangi 2013: 859). Given the logistics of assembling PRT and supporters from across and beyond the capital (some came from Yogyakarta), the protest needed to appear novel and make a splash. Figure 1 shows one way that organisers ensured high visibility. A group of protesters, wearing a politicised maid's uniforms as costumes, stand at the kerbside, their bodies open to public view.

Passers-by, one might imagine, could hardly miss the crimson lettering on the brilliant white aprons. A second photograph, published by the *Tempo* magazine but not reproduced here, indicates that eighteen women made up the line and that the letters spelt out *15 Pebruari Hari PRT* (15 February Domestic Workers Day).[11] "Fashioned as activists" (Roces 2012: 144), all the women wear the apron and some the *serbet* headscarf, itself an eye-catching item that was familiar,

11 The photograph can be viewed at https://www.datatempo.co/foto/detail/P1602200900098/unjuk-rasa-jaringan-nasional-advokasi-prt (accessed 2 May 2022).

yet out of place on the street. Seeing PRT bodies assembled at the roundabout was likely to jolt the senses – domestic workers were not expected, after all, to move much beyond their employers' backyards, let alone show political agency (Amnesty International 2007: 26, 40).

Yet, apart from their outfits, the women appear quite ordinary. Described as *ibu ibu* (mothers), they were members of a Women's School established in 2003 in a poor and densely packed neighbourhood on the banks of Jakarta's polluted River Ciliwung. Few women living there had completed high school and many worked as PRT. A feminist NGO, Kapal Perempuan, whose founder had been a close student friend of Lita Anggraini and was a life-long supporter of JALA, had established the school in 2003 – hence its involvement in this protest.[12] The women's sparkling outfits metaphorically brought them, and the hitherto hidden bodies of other PRT, to light. Modest napkin-headscarves (or other headgear including the fitted Islamic *jilbab*) tied over pulled-back hair and enveloping aprons repudiated any resemblances to "Inem the sexy maid", eponymous heroine of an ever-popular Indonesian film. Rather, the image is of modest, hardworking but vulnerable women, more akin to housemaids or nurses than traditional PRT, who might wear old clothes to work as a rule. On what seems to have been its first appearance (I found no photographs depicting a maid's uniform prior to this event), the professionalism of a white uniform was interposed with the heroic, sacrificial red of Indonesia's flag, emphasising that PRT belong to the family of the nation.

Taken at the same event, the photograph in Figure 2 illustrates how even a single element of the maid's costume, the *serbet* headscarf, helped PRT visualise themselves and be seen by others as workers and citizens with the right to speak. The speaker in Figure 2 was a longstanding member of Indonesia's first domestic worker union, travelled from Yogyakarta for the occasion. Her *serbet* signals her PRT status, her possession of the megaphone, legitimacy. Doreen Lee (2016: 82) suggests that *orasi* ("speeches") constituted the "symbolic and physical centre" of Indonesian protest traditions. If customarily, union leaders monopolised megaphones (Juliawan 2011: 359), here a PRT takes the stand. In terms of public perceptions, a PRT appears as an activist. In terms of workers' self-regard, she models political participation. Behind her, a group of young male unionists watch on. Their comic painted placards castigate unscrupulous and abusive employers (*majikan*). On stage, speakers pursued the *pekerja* (worker) theme. One exchange went as follows:

> Activist: Who calls themselves *pembantu* ["helper"] here?
>
> Crowd: We should stop calling ourselves *pembantu*. We are workers!

12 Yanti Muchtar died aged 53 in November 2015. A feminist activist since the 1980s, she was also a co-founder of another well-known feminist group Solidaritas Perempuan. Both organisations continue to support the domestic workers' campaign.

The two elements of the maid's uniform used in 2009 – the red and white apron and the *serbet* headscarf – created eye-catching and memorable images of PRT as both vulnerable victims and political activits. The costumes helped secure media coverage: reporters noted the surprisingly large numbers present, the novel use of aprons, *serbet* and kitchen utensils, made reference to Sunarsih, and described motorists showing support. Though there was no overnight success, Indonesia's Parliament restarted work on the Domestic Workers Bill that had lain dormant since 2004 and placed the RUU PPRT on its list of legislation for 2010.

## PRT as national heroine – a Love Napkin and Domestic Workers Day 2010

In 2010, National Domestic Workers Day was held in Proclamation Park in central Jakarta, the site of Indonesia's declaration of independence from the Dutch in August 1945. The location lent itself to a new leitmotif – that of the PRT as a national heroine, on a par with migrant domestic workers feted by governments as economic heroes for sending valuable remittances home. Protesters added to their existing claims the demand that the government support an ILO convention, and once again around 300 people attended, of whom perhaps 100 were PRT or returned migrant domestic workers (Saherman 2010).

This time the day had a degree of official blessing, however. Organised and sponsored by the ILO in conjunction with a new coalition of NGOs and unions (with JALA at its core) that included the influential group Migrant Care, proceedings were opened by the deputy minister for Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (if not by the Minister herself, as billed). Well-known actor and rising politician Reike Diah Pitaloka attended in her role of goodwill ambassador for Indonesia's migrant workers. Prior to the opening, supporters had assembled at the National Monument, Monas, and marched to the park. The programme included prayers, speeches by officials and workers, the parading of a giant four-metre-tall cut-out PRT doll, and, as the highpoint of the event, the sewing together of 1000 napkins gathered from across the archipelago into a *Serbet Cinta*, or Love Napkin PRT. Linking the Love Napkin with the date of the protest (Valentine's Day), Lita Anggraini expressed hope that the performance would evince "love and concern" and build "solidarity and appreciation" with and for PRT (Kompas 2010). Finally, lunches were provided, after which some PRT travelled to the Hotel Indonesia roundabout to unfurl the *Serbet Cinta* there (ILO 2010).

Figure 3 shows the uniform outfits provided for some 50 of the PRT attending. Each has a neat tied-back hairstyle and a *serbet* headscarf, almost all wear an official white PRT T-shirt, and a few sport a colourful apron in orange – the signature shade adopted by JALA for its logo, website and publicity materials.

Figure 3: National Domestic Workers Day, 14 February 2010 (photo by Herman Saherman)

Figure 4: Sewing the giant napkin together, 14 February 2010 (photo by Herman Saherman)

Gathered as a homogenous group, the PRT resembled the millions of female factory workers already acknowledged as vital members of the nation's workforce. Lined up in front of the monumental statues of the nation's founding fathers, Sukarno and Hatta, the PRT appear as a disciplined army ready to do the nation's bidding. Indeed, the banner propped against the plaque bearing the words of Indonesia's Declaration of Independence depicts a multi-armed PRT brandishing household tools, evoking stock images of the brave young Indonesian warriors, armed only with sharpened bamboo sticks, who were enlisted to fight against the Dutch between 1945 and 1949.

Such images were likely to have been familiar to all present (Strassler 2006: 58). The style of those revolutionary heroes, including the way they tied red and white bandanas around their heads to show their allegiance, had been adopted by the student protesters of the 1990s, armed only with "provocative words and appearance" (Lee 2016: 91–94). Indeed, the speaker holding the microphone in Figure 3 has tied her *serbet* bandana style, her stance echoing that on the banner beside her. Her presence embodied JALA's claims that promises of equality and social justice for all made in 1945 have yet to be fulfilled for Indonesia's PRT.

As in 2009, red lettering played a role. The finished "Love Napkin", a section of which is shown in Figure 4, was covered with huge red capitals spelling out the movement's demands. Like the bandanas, the blood-red writing situated PRT as heirs to the "political and chromatic redness" of protests staged at the beginning of Reformasi (Lee 2016: 86–87). The colour emphasised the PRT as citizens, entitled to the state's protection under the red and white of Indonesia's flag. Used on an apron, comic placard or giant "Love Napkin", red lettering broadcast contentious messages in intriguing ways.

In their white T-shirts and spotless headscarves, the PRT at the 2010 protest also resembled overseas migrant workers often depicted in uniform on agency websites (Killias 2018). Yet these demo T-shirts bore the ILO wreath, not logos of "maid supply" companies. Participating in what performance scholar Rachel Hann describes as "a subversive event of dressing" the protesters were conducting "a conscious act of appearance" (2017:12). Standing in line or stitching the giant *serbet*, domestic workers at the 2010 protest aligned themselves with a global campaign of domestic worker resistance and empowerment while simultaneously framing their claims in terms of Indonesia's hallowed nationalist imaginaries.

## Washing lines, laundry baskets and irons – National Domestic Workers Day 2011

On 14 February 2011, a wet and grey Monday, JALA returned to the Hotel Indonesia Roundabout for National Domestic Workers Day. It was a weekday: numbers were down in comparison with previous years. Photographs on JALA's

Flickr account indicate that perhaps 40 to 50 attended.[13] The demonstration was organised by a new network, the Action Committee for Domestic Workers (*Komite Aksi Pekerja Rumah Tangga*), formed when one of Indonesia's largest trade union confederations agreed to lend support.[14] With additional resources, the staging of the event, dubbed the "100 Washing Lines" protest, was impressive. Five-foot-tall wooden drying racks hung with 100 items of clothing printed with yellow and black slogans were spaced out around the roundabout. A huge orange banner demanded a domestic worker law and ratification of ILO C189. Slogans reminded employers that they could only look smart at work and politicians that they could only "represent the people" because PRT kept their clothes clean.

Figure 5 shows the costume uniform used in 2011. Worn by the dozen or so women whose role it was to mime the washing, drying and ironing of their employers' laundry during the demonstration, and by some of the trade union supporters (mostly men) who manhandled the props, the styling was more subversive than before. Black T-shirts were topped with identical white aprons edged in blue and adorned with pin-on badges featuring a tiny orange T-shirt proclaiming "*PRT=pekerja*" (worker). The aprons were printed with loud black and yellow slogans demanding "*Wudjukan UU PRT!*" (Pass the Domestic Workers Bill!). The exclamation mark and colouring conveyed urgency. The PRT had white-painted faces; some wore the *serbet* headscarf as well. White faces and washing lines are part of Indonesia's performance and protest traditions, conjuring the clown servants (*punawakan*) of Javanese theatre regarded in post-Suharto Indonesia as embodying the "honesty and […] wisdom" of the common man (Pausacker 2004: 219). *Punawakan* had permission, appropriated here by the PRT Action Committee, to criticise their betters in the interests of the common good.

The performance was enlivened by colourful props – pink and blue laundry baskets, flowery ironing boards, orange irons, washtubs and scrubbing brushes. Along with *serbet* and aprons, these caught the attention of passers-by and motorists, but this time it was the pantomime element and pointed messaging that the media commented upon. Indeed, the PRT who participated won admiration for continuing their performance despite the drizzle (see, for example Detik News 2011). The 2011 protest helped engineer change. The parliamentary committee tasked with progressing the bill had halted work (for reasons unknown) in the middle of 2010 (Eddyono 2016: 80). The Washing Lines protest, a citizen's lawsuit[15] and further protests during 2011 pushed Parliament

13 https://www.flickr.com/photos/124653589@N03/14015889128/in/photostream/ (accessed 27 February 2022).

14 Interview with vice-president of the Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions (KSPI), Jakarta, 16 February 2016.

15 On 5 April 2011, 152 activists filed a lawsuit accusing the president, vice president and senior ministers of failing to protect the rights of domestic workers. JALA used the hearings to gain further publicity. The Central Jakarta Court rejected the lawsuit but recommended that Parliament press ahead with legislation (Eddyono 2016).

Figure 5: National Domestic Workers Day 2011, Jakarta (photo by JALA PRT)


Figure 6: The Love Napkin for domestic workers about to be raised onto the gates of Parliament, 22 November 2012 (photo by Sutradini / beritagar.id)

to establish ajoint working group and produce the *naskah akademis*, the academic paper required to support any bill.[16] However, by early December 2011, it became clear that the DPR planned to postpone further debate. Only lobbying and a three-day protest, during which Lita Anggraini (wearing *serbet* and apron) and others chained themselves to the gates of Parliament, got the bill reinstated (da Costa 2015).

Self-interest was at play in the delaying tactics of the DPR: politicians were well known to employ "five or more" PRT in their homes even as lobby groups such as employers' organisations claimed that the country could not afford to pay PRT the demanded minimum wage.[17] Parliamentarians and policy makers opposed legislation on doctrinal grounds. They saw PRT as "family members" and loyal servants, linking domestic service with traditions of service in royal palaces, a belief in the value of *gotong royong* (understood broadly as mutual assistance) and a tradition of *negneger*, a system in which children or young adults from poorer rural villages stayed with richer relatives in cities, doing domestic chores in return for their keep and, sometimes, an education. Politicians also wanted to keep the domestic sphere private (Eddyono et al. 2016: 114).

16 Activists and academics could provide material for these papers which detailed the rationale for bills and set out the main issues a law needed to address. At this stage discussions were based on the draft that JALA submitted to Parliament in 2004, which precluded child labour, limited a working day to 7 or 8 hours (before overtime), gave PRT one day off a week, 12 days of holiday, maternity and menstruation leave, health insurance and the right to join unions and political parties. Standard pay should relate to regional minimum wage levels and reflect specialisations such as nanny or cook.

17 Interview with activist; interview with member of DPR, Jakarta, 3 August 2015; interview with ILO official, Jakarta, 9 July 2015; interviews with union officials, Jakarta, 15 and 16 February 2016.

## 100% Workers and a giant toilet for Parliament – politics and protests 2012–2015

Faced with intransigence, JALA sought new allies. As the ILO expected mainstream labour unions to support ratification of Convention C189, two further union confederations, along with a group of NGOs opposing child labour and a prominent migrant workers' union, joined the Action Committee, renaming it the "Action Committee for the Protection of Domestic Workers and Migrant Workers" or KAPPRT-BM (*Komite Aksi Perlindungan Pekerja Rumah Tangga-Buruh Migran*).[18] Mounting a succession of protests from 2012 onwards, KAPPRT-BM showcased and schooled PRT as worker-activists, with some protests planned well in advance, such as one held outside the Presidential Palace on 18 December 2012, International Migrants Day, or another at the manpower ministry on 16 June 2014 marking International Domestic Workers Day. Others were in response to delays in the progress of the RUU PPRT through Parliament. Claims were directed to politicians, increasingly portrayed in protests as obstructionist and quite likely corrupt. The use of costumes and props, likewise, became more adversarial.

Two demonstrations, the "100% Workers Protest" and the "Giant Toilet and Broom Protest" illustrate how costume and props were used at this stage. Figure 6, a photograph taken at the first of these events, staged outside Parliament on 22 November 2012, illustrates how organisers used costumes to maximise the aesthetic and political potential of the chosen location. The wording on the improvised apron of the PRT shown in the picture reads as follows:

> *Dibalik* (behind): *Pakaian bersih* (clean clothes), *Makanan tersadi* (prepared meals), *Rumah rapi* & *bersih* (clean and tidy house), *Anak terawat* (well-cared for children), *Halaman bersih* (clean yard).
>
> Underneath these words, an arrow pointed to the acronym "PRT".

The image captures a moment when a costumed PRT ran towards the high metal gates of the DPR. Five male trade unionists, two wearing *serbet* headscarves, are silhouetted atop the railings while protesters below raise the Love Napkin (the one created in 2010), its red-scrawled messages re-inscribed. In a theatrically contentious manner, PRT claimed "ownership" of the DPR as the "House of the People", a familiar refrain in post-1998 labour protests (Juliawan 2011). Red is the dominant hue, as it was during Reformasi (the period leading up to and following the end of the New Order) when the "Sukarno red" of Indonesia's flag and the colours of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle stirred "leftist and populist sympathies" (Lee 2016: 14). Then, students had climbed the gates of the University of Indonesia's campus and later, in their thousands, occupied parliament for five days. Now, PRT supporters stormed

18 Interview, head of Trade Union Research Centre, Jakarta, 16 February 2016.

the gates of parliament symbolically, thus positioning PRT as heirs to that pro-democracy movement.

As shown in Figure 6, the aprons used at the 100% Workers protest were made of paper, not fabric as in earlier protests. With cut-out necklines and without strings, the aprons hung freely over the protesters' bodies. A second snapshot taken the same day (not shown for reasons of space) depicts at least ten PRT wearing these aprons over jeans and T-shirts, their bodies metaphorically freed, one might argue, from apron strings tying them to domestic duties. As some workers told me, husbands and employers could forbid them from going on marches, leading them to resort to subterfuge. Others reported that initially reluctant family members had started to take pride in their political involvement and new identities.

Covered in inscriptions, paper aprons turned the bodies of the protesters into billboards. Some read "*PRT 100% Pekerja*" (PRT 100% workers). Others urged the president and members of Parliament to ratify ILO convention C189. The message on the back of the demonstrator in Figure 6 picks up a popular political catchword – *bersih*, meaning "clean". It reminds politicians that behind their clean clothes, tasty meals, clean and tidy houses, well-groomed children and swept yards stands a PRT lacking legal protection. With a genealogy dating back to anti-colonial nationalism, slogans handwritten in capitals conveyed authenticity (Strassler 2020: 175, 179). Paired with a napkin headscarf, the apron still signified "maid", but, as some PRT raised clenched fists for the press, the colour, style, gesture and rhetoric co-produced a character-forming visual imaginary of the PRT as empowered worker-activist.

In 2013, after public consultations and a study visit to South Africa and Argentina, the relevant committee of the DPR proposed its own version of the Bill for Parliament as a whole to consider. Although JALA PRT and KAPPRT-BM believed that this new version contained only 60% of their original proposals – compromising on matters such as wages, working hours, social security and child domestic work – they pushed for its passage while continuing to lobby for changes (JALA PRT 2015). Even this scaled down Bill, however, was not assured.

When I bade farewell to Lita Anggraini in September 2014, after a period of fieldwork, she told me to look out for news of a protest that would be "spectacular". Since the revised Bill had not been passed before the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2014, activists planned to present new and returning members of Parliament with a symbolic gift or *kado* on the day of the Parliament's inauguration to ensure that PRT claims were not forgotten. First a giant polystyrene toilet and broom were paraded along the highway by a group of unionists from KAPPRT-BM followed by domestic workers and activists, and then around 50 protesters gathered at the gates of Parliament for speeches and photographs. Judging from the photographs, PRT themselves, half hidden


Figure 7: Greeting the new Parliament with a giant toilet, 1 October 2014 (photo by JALA PRT)

behind the large red banner, were few in number; the focus was on the symbolism – and media appeal – of the giant toilet and broom. The phrase "Stop Slavery Towards PRT" (*Stop perbudakan thd PRT*) inscribed on the toilet was contentious, as was the wording of Anggraini's press release, which explained:

> The giant toilet symbolizes the need for the DPR to throw out any dirt such as corruption, collusion or nepotism (KKN), bribery, slavery, abuse of authority, as well as extortion that may be performed by members of the House. The giant broom is a tool for parliament to clean up all its obligations. (Wulandari 2014: 1)

Chief amongst the obligations of newly elected parliamentarians (referred to as the "*DPR Baru*" on the banner in Figure 7), from JALA's perspective, was to pass the long-promised RUU PPRT. To return to Agarwala's analysis of class formation amongst informal workers, here the movement associates its claims with the wider cause of anti-corruption, tapping into populist disappointment with post-1998 politics. The giant toilet and broom point to the self-interest and corruption of politicians; dirt in the system was blocking the PRT bill. Trade union flags and the large red banner carrying the names of JALA's three partner union confederations conveyed the message that PRT were accepted members of Indonesia's organised labour movement, marking another transition point in the emergence of an Indonesian domestic worker class.

Spectacle was achieved; the giant toilet, broom and array of pots, pans and brushes foregrounded in Figure 7 garnered plentiful press coverage. Costumes had changed again. Few, apart from the female orator, wear improvised aprons. Instead a contentious tone is set by *serbet* headscarves tied bandana- or commando-style and the red and white banner, a tone adopted by a reporter who described Lita Anggraini as "field coordinator" or *koordinator lapangan*, a term that had

been part of the "militarized taxonomy" of Reformasi (Hiz 2014, Lee 2016: 75). While in earlier demonstrations the costume uniforms had been gendered female, here male figures wearing the *serbet* are also foregrounded. The *serbet* has become a synecdochal sign for a maid's uniform – and, in turn, for the movement as a whole.

## Hunger strikes: 2014 and 2015

A few weeks later, on 24 November 2014, five women – Lek Jumiyem, Sargini, Haryati and Ririn Sulastrii, established PRT organisers from Yogyakarta, together with Lita Anggraini – chained themselves to the gates of Indonesia's Parliament in Jakarta and began a hunger strike. This was an act of desperation, fuelled by feelings of betrayal. On 1 May 2014, at the beginning of his successful presidential election campaign, Joko Widodo, then Governor of Jakarta, had met with PRT activists and seemingly promised his support.[19] Other parliamentary candidates also made pledges. Yet by mid-November 2014, there was no sign of ministerial or parliamentary engagement. Parliamentary business was at a standstill. This political vacuum created an opportunity for PRT to press their case. The situation was urgent. The strikers said they would continue fasting until they had a statement from Parliament that the 2013 Bill would be on the priority list for discussion in 2015, debated during 2015 and passed by the end of the parliamentary term. They also demanded that Indonesia ratify C189.

The strike was supported by 45 women's and civil society organisations affiliated with JALA PRT and seven others, including three overseas groups. There were plans to stage "cultural and public speeches, photo exhibitions, film screenings, monologues, poetry readings, discussions and musical performances" while the strike was in progress (IDWFED 2014). During the strike, other PRT and activists stood by in support while the hunger strikers posed for photographs and made speeches. Friends from legal aid associations and others with good connections in Parliament lobbied behind the scenes to win a hearing with the National Legislative Committee.

Class-inflected politics shaped pre-event publicity. Co-curated by JALA, KAPPRT-BM and the Urban Poor Consortium (UPC), circulars set a tone of enraged militancy. One flyer portrayed the profile of a dynamic woman set against a red background, shouting into a black megaphone. Another featured a bright orange apron embellished with a spoon and fork arranged hammer-and-sickle style. The logo of the Urban Poor Consortium and that of its Jakarta offshoot, the Urban Poor Network, were printed on publicity materials. These logos linked JALA's demands with a vision of the urban poor (including domestic

19 Interview with Lita Anggraini, 27 August 2014.

Figure 8: Domestic Workers on Hunger Strike Demonstration urging the deliberation of the Domestic Workers Law (photo by Hukumonline, Cr. 17)

workers) as a "coherent group or class" with rights to the city and the potential to challenge clientelist politics (Wilson 2019: 105).

Nonetheless, clamouring aprons and motifs were downplayed in the way the strikers wore their "housemaids' uniforms" (Figure 8). Orange aprons did feature, half hidden under improvised white ones. While Figure 8 shows the hunger strikers collapsed, exhausted, against the railings, other photographs show them standing with clenched fists raised, chained to the gates like the early suffragettes, wielding the megaphone or standing in line with other similarly clad supporters.[20] The militant tone was offset, however, by neat *serbet* headscarves, in two cases worn over white hijabs, material evidence that pious and feminist agency can coexist (Rinaldo 2013: 195). Posing for photographers, the strikers smiled, rehearsed speeches nervously, stood stoically in the rain and, as shown in Figure 8, leaned, exhausted, against the gates of the DPR. Framed by snapshots of PRT victims of abuse pegged up like washing, this political dramaturgy brought to mind the fellow-workers for whom the privations of the hunger strike were being endured.

Lita Anggraini dressed differently. Her black T-shirt and beige trousers drew the eye less than the orange and white costumes of the PRT. Just as Annie Kenney, a factory worker in the mills of Lancashire from the age of ten, brought

20 Suffragettes fought for votes for women in the UK between 2006 and 2014. Known for their mass rallies, fashionable attire, trademark colours of purple, white and green and their motto "Deeds not words", they smashed shop windows and set fires. In London, they chained themselves to the railings outside Parliament, outside the Prime Minister's residence and at government offices. Many were imprisoned for their militancy and went on hunger strike when the authorities refused them the status of political prisoner.

authenticity to suffragette claims to represent all women when she wore her clogs and shawl (Jenkins 2019: 480–85), so did restricting the "maid's costume" to those who worked as PRT helped to characterise this protest as the workers' own.

As such, the hunger strike holds a special place in the movement's collective history. In 2017, the ILO published a collection of stories written by domestic workers. One of the strikers, Lek Jumiyem (2017), contributed a piece entitled "The Hunger Strike and the Spirit of our Struggle" (*Mogok Makan dan Nadi Perjuangan Kami*). In it she conveys the material and affective dimensions of the strike – stinging morning air, intense humidity, heavy rain, long hours standing until sunset, fear of a fracas with police who tried to clear them from the site at nightfall and the buzz of mosquitoes that stopped them sleeping. She spoke of spirituality – prayers and lighting of candles – and the solidarity shown by fellow activists trying to communicate with MPs to get them a hearing. Spurred by the sight of the hunger strikers, a quite different group of labour protesters, there to demand increases in the minimum wage, collected donations to help pay their expenses. For Jumiyem, the hunger strike was not just the routine "oration, carrying protest equipment, posters and banners" she was used to. Deeply internalised, it constituted "one act in a life drama […] a thing never imagined" and something "we loved to live" (Jumiyem 2017: 147–51).

Finally, towards the end of the second day, the strikers won a hearing with the National Legislative Body. They sat in the committee chamber in costume, secured promises of support, and called off their action, celebrating a significant victory when, on 19 January 2015, the Minister of Manpower issued a "Regulation on the Protection of Domestic Workers" (*Permenaker* No. 2 / Tahun 2015). While it did not meet all of JALA's demands and was not legally binding, this was a step up from silenced invisibility.

The celebrations were short-lived. The Domestic Workers Bill was not on the list of priority legislation announced in February 2015. At this, activists launched a second hunger strike. Lita Anggraini began the strike on 16 February. She fasted during the day until 24 March when she and other JALA supporters won a hearing with members of the parliamentary committee responsible for the bill, who promised to promote it. Each day volunteers joined Lita, fasting for 24 hours in turn. At one point, Lita was hospitalised. Throughout the strike, JALA staged rallies at different venues, in the capital and in cities such as Semarang, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, Makassar and Mataram. However, despite widespread support the bill was shelved again. In May 2015, JALA reviewed its strategy. Looking to the long term, it decided to focus on increasing the numbers and strengthening the leadership in PRT-led organisations and unions across the archipelago, building towards a domestic workers confederation, so as to have more heft (Gastaldi 2017). Nevertheless, procrastination by Parliament has continued up until today. PRT still stage street protests and join larger

events such as May Day marches or the Women's March organised in Indonesia since 2017 – JALA being one of the groups behind that venture.

As illustrated in Figure 9, a photograph taken on 3 March 2018 at the second Jakarta Women's March, a red or black T-shirt or sweatshirt carrying the slogan "*PRT=Pekerja Rumah Tangga*" (PRT = Domestic Worker) has become the go-to dress for domestic workers joining demonstrations in Jakarta. With its memorable message, the T-shirt, paired by younger women with jeans, is as much a personal and collective identity marker as a political billboard. Striking on its own, it is easily dressed up, as in Figure 9, where marchers have appropriated the woven bamboo hats familiar in rural Java but out of place in the megacity. The colourway reprises connections with protest traditions and ensures that the presence of PRT will not be missed. On social media and in publicity materials, however, JALA still uses its brand identity orange. The *serbet*, likewise, remains a key symbol, marking the movement as unique.

In dressing up, carrying pots and pans, and waving the winnowing baskets painted to carry letters making up the word *pekerja* (worker) that have been used in Yogyakarta and Jakarta on PRT demonstrations for at least ten years, the women joining this 2018 march ally themselves with history. Wearing their outfits with pride, and some with evident joy, their appearance illustrates how housemaids' uniform-costumes have evolved into a fun, fashionable, feminist and transnational PRT activist street style.

Figure 9: JALA PRT members at the Women's March in Jakarta in 2018 (photo by Kate Walton)

## Conclusion

This article has shown how the politics of domestic work in Indonesia have been conducted, in part, by using costume. Photographs do not tell us precisely what impact costumes had on participants or the public. Nor do they provide a full picture of events. But, I have argued, they have revealed how, in a climate of heightened "public visuality", a subversive "housemaid's uniform" helped secure Indonesia's domestic workers a presence in the contested public sphere (Strassler 2020: 15–16). From this discursive space, JALA and its allies projected PRT as worthy citizens and modern professionals and kept their demands on the political agenda. The "feminine specificity" (Parkins 1997: 45) of aprons, headscarves, mops and brooms accentuated the vulnerabilities of PRT bodies while, paradoxically, showcasing an unexpected capacity for resistance.

If initially the apron and *serbet* drew attention to domestic workers' vulnerability and accentuated the novelty of seeing PRT in a mock uniform at protests, aprons increasingly became billboards, and *serbet* served as markers of allegiance to a wider political and labour movement. Red, used on the Love Napkin, on aprons, on banners and finally for PRT T shirts, has retained its importance, linking PRT with Indonesia's protest traditions, and, it may be, with women's rights activists elsewhere who have taken up the red and white costumes of Margaret Attwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. As more PRT join unions and go on marches, the printed T shirt and *serbet*, decked out with accoutrements, suffice to signal to the Jakarta public that PRT are involved. Outside the capital, as new PRT unions emerge, the *serbet* and apron, or some form of uniform top, also feature. In Semarang, East Java, on 14 December 2021, for example, PRT reinterpreted aspects of an established domestic worker street style by wearing orange over-shirts with the *serbet* to stand with their feet chained together holding placards demanding that the RUU PPRT be passed.

Archived photographs of protests continue to circulate. On 18 January 2022, for example, a nationwide broadcaster focusing on news and sports screened a programme discussing domestic workers' dashed hopes for a domestic worker law. The programme opened with a montage that used a series of stills taken at demonstrations perhaps forgotten by viewers, with the *serbet* headscarves, aprons and printed T shirts performing their work of persuasion again (see Metro TV 2022)

Despite COVID-19, JALA PRT persuaded the DPR to include a draft domestic workers law on its list of legislation in 2021 and 2022. When, eventually, PRT and their allies celebrate its passage – and, in 2024, mark JALA's twentieth anniversary – it seems likely that the *serbet* will feature again, completing its journey from everyday work-tool to symbol of solidarity and flag of victory.

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# Women's Agency through Fashion in North Korea's Transition

Kyungja Jung, Bronwen Dalton

## Abstract

North Korean women's fashion has changed in the context of women's relatively recently assumed role as critical actors in North Korea's market-dependent economy. Through examination of changes in women's fashion we learn more about how the way women choose to dress can become an agentic and empowering process. The article argues that the case of North Korean women and their dress practice can inform our understanding of how women, even in the most oppressive of circumstances, develop tactics to manipulate the systems and social order that seek to control them. North Korean women have enacted upon their agency deliberately, getting away with what they can while simultaneously skilfully avoiding the dire consequences of being identified as actors who dare to disrupt the status quo. This type of agency is not always understood or appreciated by Western liberal frames and sensibilities of agency that centralise notions of individualism and freedom. This nuanced appreciation of women's agency has the potential to expand the "rights, choices and autonomy" Western discourse of women's agency in ways that are inclusive of women who live, and sometimes manage to thrive, in the face of extreme oppression. This paper is informed by the authors' field notes from trips to North Korea and by 45 in-depth interviews with North Korean refugees, regular visitors to North Korea and NGO workers.

**Keywords:** North Korea, fashion, clothing culture, agency, women, femininity, status, dress politics, grassroots capitalism

For those who have visited North Korea over time, one of the most observable changes has been changes in women's fashion. Despite the strict regulations and possibility of punishment, the female population of the country has been experimenting with new styles of bodily practices, including fashion, which were previously seen as signs of decadence and the practice of "non-socialism". Although there have been numerous studies and media reports indicating that North Koreans have adopted capitalism and accepted market-based values and

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culture (Cha 2012, Tudor / Pearson 2015, Jung et al. 2018), there has thus far been no sign of any significant political change in North Korea. In fact, despite the official rhetoric of upholding socialism, grassroots capitalism has managed to coexist with the political system and shape North Koreans' everyday lives.

Women's fashion trends in the country can be considered as a lens through which we can get a glimpse of the transformation and the contestation taking place between these two systems, particularly from the mid-1990s, the time of the famine known as the Arduous March, to the current Kim Jong-un regime. Reconsidering the Western liberal feminist concept of "agency" and exploring the concept in socialist and post-socialist states, we explore women's tactics of disregarding official socialist sartorial dictums in order to follow capitalist culture and fashion trends. Further, we explore the implications of this testing of fashion boundaries for women and for North Korean society in general.

The paper is informed by non-participant observation made during two visits to North Korea and 45 in-depth interviews with female North Korean refugees. In South Korea, one of the researchers participated in a variety of activities to build rapport with female refugees and gain insight into their lives, which included attending church services for North Korean refugees for an extended period as well as a North/South Korean Women's Choir and other activities. Two four-hour-long semi-structured interviews with participants recruited through snowball sampling were conducted at sites of their choosing. Twenty-three interviewees were in their twenties and thirties at their time of departure, with nine in their forties, five in their fifties, four in their sixties and two in their teens. The majority (twenty-three) of those interviewed left North Korea between 2010 and 2015, sixteen arrived in South Korea between 2001 and 2009 and five between 1994 and 1999, which made it possible to conduct a chronological analysis. Interviews were analysed through NVivo by identifying common themes throughout the interviews. In addition to refugee interviews, the study also utilised secondary sources and the non-participant observation notes taken by Bronwen Dalton during her two seven-day trips to North Korea in 2014 and 2015. Dalton paid particular attention to women's fashion changes during her supervised visits to schools, theatres, hairdressers, restaurants, department stores and other public spaces in Pyongyang, Hyesan and Kaesong.

## Reconsidering women's agency in socialist or post-socialist states

Women's agency in socialist states is under-researched. Historically, socialist states have claimed to have eradicated gender inequality. However, most researchers argue that the socialist project of women's emancipation has either failed or is incomplete, given that gendered hierarchies are so deeply engrained

in everyday life (Valoy 2015). Women's liberation in the socialist state was necessarily tied to women's traditional roles, for instance, in raising healthy and harmonious families. Gender roles and relations in post-socialist states have changed dramatically since the Soviet collapse and the opening to the market system of the West. Scholarship on women in post-socialist states is marginalised in feminist studies that have assumed that these states are auxiliary to, and affiliated with, the West and merely suffer from a "lag" in systemic gender enfranchisement and modernisation (Koobak / Marling 2014). Nevertheless, this approach is problematic as it does not adequately explain why inequality remains in this static position that keeps post-socialism locked in the "lag" and in a frame of perpetually "catching up" or "transitioning" within the transnational feminist context (ibid.: 335). In this context, women in socialist/post-socialist states are often portrayed as being oppressed and lacking agency (Valoy 2015).

Like many other socialist countries, despite state rhetoric North Korea has failed to achieve gender equality in reality; instead, gender segregation and inequality in the household and society remain prevalent. Despite the radical change brought about after the socialist revolution, North Korea's adherence to the Marxist perspectives that oppose feminism as antithetical to the class struggle, coupled with the tradition of male superiority of Neo-Confucianism firmly entrenched in the society, remain significant hurdles in the attempt to achieve gender equality (Park 2011). The lack of gender equality is also closely related to a very high portion of housewives confined to the family and their role as mothers (Jung / Dalton 2006). There has been a rupture in this situation due to women actively starting to participate in market activities in the aftermath of the severe economic crisis that hit North Korea in the mid-1990s. This market participation was not formally condoned but came to be informally accepted by the state as the only practical option open to women to feed their families.

Research on women in transitional North Korea has produced contradicting views on their status. Several researchers found that there have been apparent positive changes in gender relations and decision-making processes, particularly in the household (Jung / Dalton 2006, Dalton et al. 2018, Jung et al. 2018). Similarly, other research has indicated that economic transformations after the Arduous March in the 1990s had positive implications for family relations, norms surrounding female public behaviour, a reversal of gendered expectations when selecting a spouse and the gendered division of domestic labour (Lankov / Kim 2014: 85). Because of this, "women have become more independent and less willing to tolerate and support abusive or '[economically] incapable' husbands", thus signifying a growing sense of sexual agency and bodily autonomy not previously conceivable to many North Korean women (ibid.: 86).

Other researchers argue that women's involvement in market activities has been accompanied by a deterioration in their situation. Since marketisation, women have had to bear a triple burden, with caring and housework compounded by the demands of being the main breadwinner. This has led to an exposure to the risk of violence as the target of state control and punishment as well as to the predation of bribe-seeking officials, not to mention a rise in domestic violence sparked by disrupted gender roles and male under-employment. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland's findings (2013) suggest that despite women's recent entrepreneurial opportunities, coinciding with the collapse of the public distribution system and the rise of informal markets, women have not thrived. Due to the disproportionate shedding of women from state-affiliated employment into "a market environment characterised by weak institutions and corruption", the "increasingly male-dominated state preys on the increasingly female-dominated market" (Haggard / Noland 2013: 51). Kyung-Ae Park (2011) also found that while these new economic roles gave women stronger voices in family decision-making and allowed them to develop, to some degree, a sense of self-consciousness and awareness of their own rights, they also resulted in increased workloads, sexual violence and the stress of family breakdowns.

The literature on North Korean women's agency, though scarce, has depicted the female population, simultaneously, as objects of victimisation – in need of protection – and as economic, social and strategically mobile agents. The dearth of studies into North Korean women's agency is particularly noteworthy given that North Korean mobility and marketisation is gendered – so much so that 70 per cent of border-crossers and market traders are currently women (Kim 2016: 122).

An examination of the existing literature on North Korean women shows the extent to which women's agency, albeit within various socio-cultural, political and economic constraints, is being explored. Some research on North Korean women has challenged the definition of women's agency as based mainly on a liberal feminist view that upholds free, autonomous and rational individuals. For instance, Minjeong Kim (2013: 11) critiques the definition of agency as "the ability or capacity to act in one's best interests" on the reasonable grounds that "for those in subordinate positions within a power structure, including women, the actions may not be readily obvious assertions of their best interests". Thus, a necessarily more capacious definition of the term is "the active and creative way that human beings give meaning to their experience" (ibid.). This conceptualisation of agency encompasses a range of responses to injustice at the individual, collective and/or institutional levels, from covert and everyday forms of resistance to more direct (even "extreme") participation in political activism.

However, such flexible models of agency have had unintended and contradictory effects; while some researchers depoliticise feminist theory by merely

recounting women's agency "without challenging gender inequality or patriarchy, others are so congratulatory or euphoric that they obscure the power of subordination" (Kim 2013: 12). Further to this line of argument, scholars have insisted on the interconnectedness of agency and victimisation in order to break down dualisms that position one as extrinsic to the other, and hence, "empowerment and resistance [...] as being mutually exclusive with experiences of victimisation" (ibid.).

Transnational and postcolonial feminists have sought to elucidate this false dichotomy, alongside the subject-author hierarchy, and draw attention to the ways in which the concept of "agency" is itself bound up in Western imperialist logics. Consequently, the specific experiences, geopolitical contexts and historical heterogeneities of third world women must take priority over what Chandra Mohanty has called an "ethnocentric universality" – the process whereby "legal, economic, religious, and familial structures are treated as phenomena to be judged by Western standards" (Mohanty 1984: 351).

Sung Kyung Kim (2012, 2014, 2016) has written several articles on North Korean women who crossed the border and married or cohabited with Chinese men in China, with half of them eventually migrating to South Korea. Kim reveals the complexity of mobility experiences beyond the "human rights victim" discourse and shows how "some women voluntarily and strategically use migration, marriage and gender as arenas of agency through which to improve their lives and empower themselves" (Kim 2014: 553). This is a process that simultaneously requires and utilises the social and cultural circumstances of their subordinated gender position. This means that the same patriarchal system that excludes them from the public sphere and formal economy is a necessary condition for their mobility and survival; "it enables alienated women to become important agents, making a living for the family and bringing the possibility of change to both North Korea and that patriarchal system itself" (ibid.: 557).

Another article by Kim complicates the restrictive stereotypes that frame North Korean women's mobility in relation to victimhood and economic impoverishment, and argues that North Korean mobility becomes possible due to women's rational calculation (Kim 2016: 117). Many North Korean women strategically engineer relationships with Chinese men to ensure their safety as a means of settlement in China.

Similarly, Eunyoung Choi takes a feminist geopolitical approach to "challenge totalising discourses that categorise North Korean women as trafficked, powerless victims in need of rescue by enlightened [Western] nations" (Choi 2014: 273). Choi draws on empirical research conducted in the North Korea-China borderlands to show that "in spite of [...] difficult circumstances, North Korean women are not powerless. They negotiate and choose even with limited options [...] and use their femininity as a tool to cross borders" (ibid.: 277). Indeed, Choi's interview data suggests that her participants understand "commercial

marriage, and potential abuse in that marriage, as a strategy for survival and mobility" (Choi 2014: 277).

In the review of how North Korean women's agency is being conceptualised across migration, citizenship and mobility studies, it was found that, as a whole, the existing scholarship tends to depict North Korean women in contradictory terms – simultaneously as calculative agents measuring the cost-benefits of their actions and as powerless victims in need of protection. This paper proceeds from the view that dress communicates identity and agentic processes (Huisman / Hondagneu-Sotelo 2005). As Susan Bordo (2013) has argued, women's appearance and embodiment are shaped by their agency, socialisation and social expectations. In examining the various modes and strategies for resettling in South Korea adopted by North Korean refugees, Hae Yeon Choo finds that they effaced their North Korean markers – including their accent, self-presentation, comportment and morals – and remade themselves into "modern citizen-subjects of South Korea" (Choo 2006: 577) by wearing fancy expensive clothes, in order to conform to South Korea gender ideals. Under the Western liberal discourse, however, those North Korean women who remain in North Korea can be seen as victims and passive voiceless subjects, whose lives are completely constrained by North Korea's patriarchal society and authoritarian regime. They seem to be "regulated, subordinated and disciplined state subjects" (Zheng 2005: 543). Starting from questions about what enacting agency means to women in North Korea and how they exercise their agency, this paper explores complex ways in which North Korean women exercise their agency through fashion and bodily practice, challenging state-imposed dress codes and feminine ideals.

## Enacting agency through fashion in opposition to official sartorial discourses

Women's fashion has been central in postcolonial nation-building and revolutionary socialist progress in North Korea and the state-imposed femininity and dress codes have served as grounds for monitoring women's bodily practices. Since 1948, North Korea's political leaders have sought to control every aspect of people's lives. As part of such strategies, a series of clothing-related policies were implemented to control ideal styles of clothing and their production and distribution. For women, normative ideas about female bodies influenced the dress practices across North Korea's elaborate *songbun* ("social status"; Kim 2011: 160). However, North Korean sartorial discourses have shifted over time in line with changes in the social, economic and political environment.

Before the emergence of private markets in the 1990s, North Korea employed a total rationing system, to ensure equal distribution of essential goods, including clothing and fabrics. While certain types of clothing were sold at government-

owned markets, ordinary people wore whatever clothing was provided to them or made their own clothes. North Korean sartorial discourses evolved "through a constant negotiation of socialist and ethnically marked femininity" (Kim 2011: 162). After the liberation from Japan in 1945, North Korea used nationalism and ethnocentric ideals to legitimate state power in the postcolonial national-building process (Kim 2011: 162). The new North Korean state saw Western/modern clothing as representing "remnants of the colonial past" and "cultural traits of the enemy class, the bourgeoisie", and such clothing came to be viewed by educated upper-class women as "compromising national purity" (ibid.: 163–164). Amidst the post-war rehabilitation period in the 1950s, clothing policy focused on promoting frugality/thriftiness in clothing styles (Kim 2012).

Dressing the population well became an indicator of modernisation, material progress and development, with an effort to expel feudalism, imperialism, patriarchy and capitalism. In the 1960s, in the consolidation of nation-building, North Korean leaders exerted efforts to make fashion a symbol of the new socialist state (Kim 2011: 163). Fashion became "a performative instrument separating the oppressive feudalism of the past" (ibid.) from the liberating socialism of the present. Until the 1960s, North Korea's sartorial discourses entailed both "ethnically marked national femininity" through traditional Korean clothing, *joseonot*, and "state-organised socialist femininity" through state-engineered fashion codes. The *joseonot*, a long black skirt and white *jeogori* (a traditional Korean jacket), became the key dress code for women, embodying working-class ethics and highlighting modest feminine beauty and virtue (Choy 2016, Kim 2011: 166). Under Kim Il-sung's regime, the synthetic fibre *vinalon* (or *vinylon*) was invented and massively produced to solve the clothing problem in the North. Kim Il-sung saw the fibre as a symbol of the country's self-reliance and dubbed it *Juche* (meaning "self-reliance") fibre. Clothes, work and school uniforms and socks were mostly made of *vinalon* until the mid-1990s (Kim 2011, Dalton et al. 2017).

Women were also encouraged to participate in the nation-building process, in the domestic, industrial, and military sphere. By 1967 women accounted for almost half of the total workforce in North Korea (Kim 2011: 176). Over time there was a gradual transition from the *joseonot* to the military/work uniform or the synchronous co-existence of the two dress codes, in the 1970s and 1980s. The *joseonot* was continuously promoted as the dress of North Korean women as a way of practising North Korea's nationalist socialism, namely, *Juche* ideology (ibid.: 172, Kim 2012). Nevertheless, the clothing style was modified to be more functional and practical, so that the wearer could more easily participate in both domestic and social labour (Kim 2011). In the consolidation of the nation-building period (1961–1980) clothing policy focused on the importance of simple functional clothing to increase workers' productivity. For a short period, Kim Il-sung even encouraged women to wear trousers at work (Choy 2016).

Figure 1: Women still wear a variation of this official uniform (photo by Alek Sigley, 2015)

During the 1980s, policy attention was given to diversification in clothing production and style and Western clothing became more accepted (Kim 2012). In several official speeches, Kim Il-sung encouraged residents in big cities to wear colourful clothing with various patterns (Choy 2016). During the inter-

views, some older women recalled that, as pre-made clothing was very scarce, having only one set of clothes was common even before the Arduous March. They added that, in big cities like Pyongyang, wealthy people/party members and officials had their clothing made by tailors. In an interview, a former dressmaker at a clothes factory in North Korea explained that some wealthy people started to wear tailor-made clothing and the stylebook was mainly from Japan:

> Our garment cutter was a repatriate from Japan. When they had arrived in North Korea, they had brought with them a Japanese stylebook. Back then, for us repatriates, clothes were not mass-produced, so people would refer to the stylebook and make their own clothes. (Joo[1], 65, interviewed in Seoul on 24 September 2014)

From the 1980s, more frequent exchanges with foreign countries and the leader Kim's visit to Eastern Europe enabled North Korea's fashion to shift from almost uniform clothing in muted colours to various clothing styles in vivid colours (Choy 2016). Seeking to impress foreign countries and to promote an image of economic progress, North Korean authorities issued instructions that banned women from wearing trousers and black or khaki-coloured clothes (ibid.). The political leaders saw colourful dresses as a signifier of socialist modernisation and prosperity. The official rhetoric inscribed the new styles into a narrative of national economic self-sufficiency, demonstrating that the state served the people's needs.

In 1989, North Korea hosted the largest international event ever held in the country, the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students. This event had a significant impact on women's fashion (Kim / Park 2019). In preparation for this event, North Korean authorities waged campaigns for desirable hairstyles and clothing, and opened an exhibition centre displaying clothes, shoes and stylebooks and patterns for dressmakers. In particular, a student activist, Lim Su-Kyung, the sole representative from South Korea, dubbed the "Flower of Unification" by the North Korean media, had a lasting and somewhat unintended impact on women's fashion in North Korea. Lim walked out into the May Day Stadium at the opening ceremony in a t-shirt, jeans and sneakers. She was pretty, outspoken and charismatic, in contrast to North Korean's image of South Koreans, whom they had been told were living in hunger and poverty, oppressed under the rule of the US imperialists and their South Korean puppet regime. She became something of a fashion icon. "Lim Su-Kyung fashion" and her short bobbed haircut became trendy among the youth, and many emulated her style (Kim / Park 2019).

From the late 1980s, however, in the increasingly malfunctioning centrally planned economy, North Korea began to experience severe economic hardship, which also weakened the distribution system for food and necessities. As the ration system finally collapsed during the early Kim Jong-il era (1994–2011),

1 All names of the interviewees have been anonymised.

people suffered further shortages of (ready-made) clothing. When informal markets sprang up across North Korea during the Arduous March of the 1990s, people had to buy daily necessities, including clothing and shoes, from them. Ironically, a vast range of products were smuggled from China, Japan (mostly second-hand) and South Korea. North Koreans thus became more fashion-conscious and started experimenting with new styles. Official sartorial discourses seemed to present various styles, by publishing the fashion magazine *Otcahrim* (meaning "Attire") and holding fashion exhibitions. However, state media promoted ideal socialist dress codes for respective gender, age and social groups, and published more articles on hairstyle and makeup (Choy 2016). Some occupations required their female workers to follow strict state dress codes/requirements. One respondent noted this was especially expected for teachers:

> The kinds of fashions that were accepted were only suits, only formal wear with leather shoes. Skirts had to reach no shorter than above the knee. It was very old-fashioned. That was especially required of teachers. (Lim, 39, interviewed in Seoul, 1 October 2014)

Under Kim Jong-il, women were strongly encouraged to wear traditional Korean attire, the *joseonot*, particularly on special occasions and celebrations. Government authorities also regulated many aspects of women's fashion and appearance. Foreign fashion styles/items (short skirts, skinny jeans, earrings and revealing clothes) were criticised as "delinquent capitalist style" and scrutinised in detail. Additionally, women were restricted to having only state-approved haircuts; long hairstyles and hair dye were prohibited. Even attention to feminine beauty was regarded as "anti-socialist" behaviour.

Soon after Kim Jong-un succeeded his father in 2011, he led a pivot from Kim Jong-il's *Songun* (military first) policies to "economy first" policies, including weakening controls over private markets and some entrepreneurial activities (Smith 2021).

With the spread of markets and in particular the growing trade with China and the strong dominance of Chinese consumer goods, which accounted for up to 85 per cent of goods at markets (Seliger 2020), North Korea soon became flooded with Chinese, South Korean, and Western influence. Hyper-sexualised consumer culture, including fashion, began to cause the regime some concern. In response, government authorities launched crackdowns on anti-socialist fashion nationwide or in big cities (Robinson, 2016). The Youth League, established in 1946 to train young people to enforce *Juche* ideology, was commandeered to serve as a kind of "fashion police" (Branigan 2014).

The obsession of North Korean political leaders with socialist femininity was well reflected in the regulation of women's right to wear trousers. Working women were supposed to dress in gender-specific clothing to work (e.g., skirts). North Korea treated women and men's dress as separate national projects (Kim 2011: 160). North Korean socialism formally promoted gender equality, but political leaders proclaimed an essentialist notion of women and encouraged

them to be "more" feminine. Although state socialism constructed women as both producers and reproducers, no equivalent state discourse supported men's social identities as fathers and workers. Such state policies had negative consequences for gender equity (Frader 2006: 583–84). The patriarchal views on women's clothing and femininity shaped their military uniforms and work clothes, and resulted in subsequent official sartorial discourse. Women's uniforms in North Korea were feminised by a pleated skirt and slim waistline, which accentuated ideals of socialist femininity. Similarly, whether women should wear skirts or trousers has been a thorny issue in the North Korean sartorial discourse until recently. As one respondent commented, women's trousers were not regarded as appropriate even for physical labour, although many young women resisted:

> When walking around in the city, authorities would tell you to wear skirts. But wearing skirts is so bothersome. When I was a student, I hated wearing skirts. I'd keep getting stopped by the fashion police, and I just hated that so much. I would wear pants all the time, and if my mother told me to wear a skirt, I'd choose a long one and wear pants underneath. I'd tuck the skirt inside my pants, and when authorities were nearby, I'd let the skirt down. That's how I got away with it. (Eun, 24, interviewed in Seoul on 14 January 2016)

## From "socialist femininity" to "capitalist hyper-femininity"

As the state promoted the ideal of North Korean women's dress through its fashion code, it also carefully constructed paragons of female virtue through legendary tales of its leaders' family members: Kang Bang-sok, Kim Il-sung's mother, and Kim Jeong-suk, Kim Il-sung's first wife and Kim Jong-il's mother (Kim 2011). Fashion, regarded as bourgeois in origin and surplus to authentic human needs, was for many years more or less abolished, which turned North Korea into a country of people dressed in muted colours, like other socialist countries (Chen 2003: 146). By wearing uniforms or state-sanctioned clothes, North Korean women demonstrated their determination to submit to state discipline, to pursue the dual values of domestic and socialist/nationalist femininity (Kim 2011: 177–8). Masses of North Koreans dressed in similar clothes, with subdued colours, not largely differentiated by class, gender or age.

The following interview succinctly explains how femininity and its related value were viewed differently in the past:

> When I grew up, I didn't think that [being pretty] was necessary; I didn't even know men liked pretty girls. I had absolutely no interest in this kind of thing. So, I never thought I wanted to be prettier. Being beautiful was not about wearing stylish clothes or having good looks but about having proper thoughts and life and being intelligent and having a sense of dignity. These were what I thought you needed to be beautiful. To me, wearing heavy makeup and wearing stylish clothes looked cheap. That was what I understood about being beautiful because I was educated to think that way. (Seol, 47, interviewed in Seoul on 27 September 2014)

Figure 2: Detail of a painting at the Grand Peoples Study House showing Madame Kim Jong Suk with Kim Il Sung fighting the Japanese (photo by Lesley Parker, 2018)

Since Kim Jong-un's assumption of power after his father Kim Jong-il's sudden death in 2012, the further expansion of the market system has led to changes in women's values. As more women worked in markets, they started to build an interest in female beauty and to express themselves with a stronger sense of self and personal identity, through fashion and appearance. Fashion and beauty came to be seen as an expression of individuality, a notion of capitalism gaining an increasing hold in North Korea (Dalton et al. 2018).

> The law says that those who like trends have been "stained by capitalism", but we admire those people and think they look nice or elegant. (Ha, 25, interviewed in Seoul on 13 January 2016)

> In North Korea, they say that a woman must be born and raised beautifully. But we didn't say this so much when we were hungry, during the Arduous March. But when the rations system stopped absolutely, people changed dramatically. After the currency reform, and as people took part in unofficial markets in Rajin City, people became more enlightened. A long time ago, people were very innocent. People are not like that now. A woman must look beautiful. North Korean families, the wealthy ones, think that looks are most important, whether a girl is pretty or not. They consider looks first. (Joo, 65, interviewed in Seoul on 24 September 2014)

A growing interest in, and enthusiasm for, fashion and beautification emerged as an essential part of the new womanhood in the Kim Jong-un era. A feminine identity was increasingly constructed and represented by fashionable presentation

and appearance. Fashion and similar trends were taken seriously, particularly by younger generations and middle/upper-class women with cash earned through market activities. Rising fashion consciousness led to women, who were not even wealthy, spending money on fashion and cosmetics instead of saving it.

> I am making money to buy fancy clothes. Not so much for savings than spending on clothing. There's a lot of competition to show off with clothes. If you purchase trendy clothes such as a padded coat, you're just proud of it. For example, even if your friends can barely eat porridge at home, they feel that they should dress well. We all were very concerned about dressing well. Used clothes are more popular than rice. (Park, 23, interviewed in Seoul on 26 January 2016)

Since the Arduous March in the mid 1990s – also known as the North Korean Famine, one of the historical events in North Korea, which led to hundreds of thousands of deaths – the younger generation, often dubbed the *Jangmadang* ("marketplace") generation, born during or after that time, has followed the latest international trends as closely as possible, despite government regulations and punishment including a ban on certain items and styles. The disastrous famine disrupted the schooling system, so that many of the *Jangmadang* generation, instead of attending school, grew up trading/shopping in the markets and gained greater insight into capitalism than their predecessors. Trends often led women to wear the same things as everybody else, as if in competition. This also resulted in the rapid and massive production of new clothing items and forced the local markets to engage in a brisk trade in these items:

> Stylish clothes come to Sinuju [a city in North Korea facing Dandong, China] through China. Then it doesn't take one week before the imitation comes out, at one-tenth the price. (Hong, 51, interviewed in Seoul on 25 January 2016)

Even though locally produced clothes are much cheaper and foreign styles are denounced in North Korean propaganda, North Korean women prefer the better quality and more stylish clothing smuggled in from China, South Korea and Japan. Second-hand clothes from South Korea and Japan are particularly popular among the well-to-do in Pyongyang, who consider them to be especially trendy (Daily NK 2015). However, tags on clothes originating from these countries are regularly removed before they are transported across the Tumen River.

> Even if Kim Jong-un says things like "American scum, American scum", American brands are still famous in North Korea […] No matter how much they promote our nation, socialism and those home-grown industries, no one really prefers North Korean products. They don't look pretty and fashionable. In North Korea, people fancy things that look good. While ordinary North Koreans most often use Chinese products, privileged elites and wealthy people prefer South Korean or Japan products. (Eun, 24, interviewed in Seoul on 14 January 2016)

> The elite officials all wear something trendy [smuggled] from South Korea or a new brand that came out of China right away, so I'm not wearing the North Korean trend. If we know this item is popular in South Korea, I buy it no matter how expensive it is, like those [elite] officers. (Kang, 30, interviewed in Seoul on 28 May 2015)

In terms of fashion leaders, it has been young women in the urban environment (particularly Pyongyang city) rather than rural people, as well as those who were repatriated from China, that have shaped fashion trends in North Korea. These trendsetters in the big cities make up the majority of the consumers of the latest fashions and other luxury items.

With growing market activities since the Arduous March of the mid-1990s, increasing interest in, and exposure to, Chinese and South Korean media, in particular, has boosted women's interest in beauty and fashion in North Korea. Chinese or South Korean TV dramas often generate new fashion trends in North Korea and circulate images endorsing women with fashionable items, cosmetic surgery or tattoos. A growing number of North Koreans have watched foreign movies and TV shows, smuggled in on DVDs or USBs, which has enabled North Koreans to glimpse the outside world and fashion trends associated with capitalism.

> They [the younger generation] are just like South Koreans. They watch [South Korean] TV drama series through USBs in secret. They wear their pants like South Koreans. [Laughter] and they dye their hair yellow like South Koreans. (Gho, 35, interviewed in Seoul on 21 January 2016)

Although one of the critical characteristics of the North Korean socialist dress code lies in its emphasis on functionality, now women increasingly choose a "hyper-feminine" look with high heels and form-fitting sequined outfits. Many women seemed to be obsessed with high heels, which they believed accentuate their femininity, attractiveness and fashion sense. Even traffic police officers and female soldiers regularly wear high heels. High heels seem to be a must item for young women in North Korea nowadays.

> I don't know why in North Korea women are obsessed with high heels, probably [because] we, girls, are short. No matter where women live, either the countryside or on the mountain, we prefer these shoes even on the unpaved roads. (Bae, 35, interviewed in Seoul on 23 January 2016)

Some research argues that women can embody "hyper-femininity", which is defined as the "exaggerated, emphasized and ideal performance of femininity" (Cvajner 2011: 358) in a broad sense, enabling women to gain social worth and respect and "detach themselves from conditions they regard as degrading" (ibid.: 356). Susan Gal and Gail Kligman (2000) argue that in the context of Eastern European post-socialist countries, younger Central European women are more likely than older women to focus on their appearance, as a sexualised feminine body signifies successful modernisation and progress.

Similarly, in North Korea, embodying the hyper-feminine ideal is understood as the key to business, career and even marriage. Many women believe that attractive people are treated more favourably in many areas of society, e.g., when selling goods or dealing with government authorities; women use trendy

fashion, makeup and cosmetic tattoos to enhance their appearance and for such social and economic reasons. Those working in the market use makeup to be more confident and assertive.

> The most common form of trade in the markets is food stalls. I would think that people would want to buy food from somebody young and pretty, not dull and bare-faced. Who would want to buy food from someone like that? If you're going to work, you need to put on makeup. (Ahn, 52, interviewed in Seoul on 26 September 2014)

> Because people began making money since the Arduous March, they came to care more about clothes and appearance. Even if inspections happened every day while sitting at the markets, people are treated with less abuse if they are dressed prettily. If you look like a beggar, people treat you like trash. (Kyung, 57, interviewed in Seoul on 17 September 2014)

An attractive appearance is also considered a valuable asset for marriage. In addition to dressing well and wearing make-up, many women have opted for cosmetic tattooing (also known as semi-permanent make-up) or even cosmetic surgery, which, although illegal and expensive, is popular among North Korean women, both young and old, especially in urban areas.

## Fashion as a symbol of wealth and means of securing social rewards

While North Korea has never resembled the leadership's self-described egalitarian socialist paradise, the last few decades of marketisation have made society more unequal than ever before. There is now a vast discrepancy between the urban rich and the rural poor in terms of consumption of clothing and household items, and income inequality has assumed dimensions similar to those found in the West, with a top 1 per cent, referred to in North Korea as the *donju*, which loosely translates as "masters of money". This group is made up of the few that had access to state resources and foreign capital in the early stages of marketisation, such as those that managed government-sponsored enterprises aimed at generating foreign currency. This group leveraged their access to goods and capital to engage extensively in the market and enrich themselves. However, for the many still working in state-allocated official jobs, supporting themselves and their family members in a marketised economy with state wages is practically impossible. Instead, the fate of these families' survival has fallen disproportionally on female family members and their capacity to earn money through participation in the market economy.

In this highly stratified society, conspicuous consumption and, due to its public visibility, clothing, has come to represent status. Fashion has become a key symbol of wealth and the means to signal to others one's place in the new social hierarchy, even, as this defector points out, when it is more performative – that is, worn to create the appearance of social success.

> When we went to take the test, we put on school uniforms. But the students, the children from the central party officers, were dressed up. They all wore suits. These Pyongyang students cut fine figures: well dressed, and taller and slimmer than us. (Koo, 49, interviewed in Seoul on 26 May 2015)

How one dresses in North Korea has emerged as a critical way of signalling one's social status, economic class and living standard, all of which form one's identity. It is evident that North Korea has been undergoing a transition; status that was once prescribed by the state is now tied to economic success in the market. Being fashionable has become a sign of wealth in an increasingly capitalistic society:

> People say clothes are really crucial in North Korea. If I wear my nice and expensive clothes, I won't be ignored wherever I go. That's why I don't buy many things but a few of the most expensive clothes. That's why I don't wear real cheap clothes. (Do, 20, interviewed in Seoul on 20 December 2016)

> [Wealthy people] wear more expensive clothes than ordinary people. And their children, too. And they buy expensive clothes for their parents, as well. So we know if someone is wealthy if they wear the trendy, padded winter clothes. We know if someone is rich if their parents, for example, wear furs, which can cost as much as 4 million won. Those furs are imported from China. If their parents wear expensive clothes, we know that that particular family has some money to spare. (Hahm, 42, interviewed in Seoul on 25 September 2014)

Figure 3: Three women in Pyongyang (photo by Alek Sigley, 2016)

A certain degree of acceptance of Western culture by Kim Jong-un was also among the major reasons behind women's increased interest in fashion and beauty. Under Kim Jong-un, the change was often from the top down. When the all-female Moranbong music band, founded by Kim Jong-un, appeared on TV in short hair and mini dresses in 2012, many North Koreans were shocked:

> I was in North Korea when the Moranbong band appeared. I think everybody was shocked. They were doing things that they hadn't done before, like dancing and wearing these kinds of short skirts [laughter]. [I thought] what kind of country are we living in? But we liked it. People said, "Yes, this is the way things should be." (Yoo, 24, interviewed in Seoul on 6 January 2015)

The official emergence of the first lady, Ri Sol-ju, led fashion trends throughout the country. Ri appeared in the state media wearing various Western designer clothes: trousers, short skirts trimmed above the knee, a jacket with somewhat deep cleavage, carrying a clutch bag and accessorising her clothes with a brooch instead of the leaders' lapel pin. This was unprecedented in North Korea. Her fashion style has become a target of envy and inspiration for many young women in North Korea (Choy 2016).

> [Ri Sol-ju] appeared [on state media] with brown hair once. In North Korea, dyeing hair is not allowed. But I became gutsy, so I dyed my hair. If I get caught by authorities, I am prepared and have things to say. (Paik, 26, interviewed in Seoul on 21 May 2015)

## Tactics of survival: corruption and bribery

Today, North Korea is effectively the site of dual systems, with socialism and proto-capitalism operating synchronously. On the surface, socialism seems to hold sway over the North Korean people through arguably the world's most robust coercive apparatus. But underneath this veneer of the one-party socialist state lies the transformative dynamic of an emerging form of capitalism. To survive, North Koreans have learned through bitter experience that it is not so much loyalty to the party line but entrepreneurial skills that are the key to prosperity. However, men continue to go to work to avoid punishment. Contradicting North Koreans' positive expectations toward a young leader who was educated and has experienced life overseas, Kim Jong-un has strengthened border control and security, and continues to oppress the public with a reign of terror and culture of surveillance, to contain the spread of capitalism and capitalist culture (Smith 2021).

However, the monopoly of state power has been undermined in many ways. North Koreans have learned how to evade the regulations and surveillance by adopting various tactics. Officially, in North Korea, the state traditionally owns all the land and housing by law, which means that the government provides

housing to its citizens without any monetary transactions. After the widespread famine in the 1990s, however, residents acquired the "right to use" housing and began conducting housing transactions based on market prices (Jang 2019). This, in turn, undermines the political principle that only "loyal classes" are allowed to inhabit certain districts, especially Pyongyang. The close control of domestic travel (in principle, citizens only have residence permits for one district, analogous to the old Soviet system, and have to register every trip beyond that) has long since collapsed due to the system of traders and nationwide job-seekers (Seliger 2020).

Key levers of domestic control have been weakened. For example, previously the possession of foreign currencies, especially the Chinese renminbi, was punished but now it is widespread and tolerated. The state's monopoly on information has also become fragile. More border trade with China has led to a boom in illegal South Korean music, soap operas and films.

One of the significant survival tactics in North Korea is bribery. With bribes, North Koreans can avoid punishment by the authorities for not going to work or for engaging in illegal trade and activities. It is no exaggeration to say that bribery and corruption have become endemic (Fifield 2017) and that they uphold the North Korean economy. Bribery is the primary way people in North Korea either get access to, or in the case of corrupt officials, pay for, food, healthcare, shelter and work (UN 2019). The constant threat of arrest and prosecution makes people vulnerable and provides state officials with a powerful means to extort money and other favours from those desperate to avoid detention in inhumane conditions (ibid.).

Schools, hospitals, factories and public offices could not operate without bribery and corruption. Illegal activities such as drug dealing, drug-taking, smuggling, watching foreign media, brokering and money exchange have blossomed thanks to bribery and corrupt officials; North Koreans can even risk crossing borders and defecting to South Korea. Through the phone connector and the currency trader, they can talk to their relatives and family members living outside North Korea and receive remittances (ibid.). Similarly, despite state-imposed dress codes, women can avoid punishment using bribes. As one respondent told us:

> The Youth League demanded some fuel. I told them I don't have fuel or money but I could buy them cigarettes, the most expensive cigarettes. I bought them a carton of those, and they finally let us go. That's how they carried out the clothes inspection. (Kyung, 57, interviewed in Seoul on 17 September 2014)

It is questionable whether these developments could lead to political changes. Without a doubt, a shift in fashion and beauty trends represents an implicit transformation within North Korean society. Although North Korean authorities crack down on the fashion and hairstyles of the so-called decadent culture of capitalism, there is a limit to the total control of their citizens' desires and

needs (Kang / Park 2011). Following a capitalist/consumer culture can lead to dissatisfaction and scepticism regarding the North Korean regime. The emulation of the capitalist style can be seen as cultural resistance or rebellion, with North Koreans no longer living under socialism.

Nevertheless, North Korea is still "a vast surveillance state" (Fifield 2017) via a state security apparatus and a neighbourhood watch system, and most North Koreans have become indifferent to politics and the political system. They are too aware of the tight surveillance in place everywhere and the consequences of criticising the political system and leaders to risk their lives and their families. North Koreans are still subject to ideological education, which includes revolutionary history and the activities of their leaders. Under tight surveillance via neighbourhood associations and a reign of terror, it is impossible for citizens to voice politically dissenting views or organise political gatherings. For example, North Koreans were well aware that Kim Jong-un's uncle, Jang Song-thaek, was convicted of treason and executed in 2013. The authorities criticised Jang for betraying the Kim family, by plotting to overthrow the younger Kim Jong-un, using economic collapse as a pretext to rule the country himself as premier and reformer (Choe 2016). North Koreans are very disillusioned with the political system, but they do not have the freedom or the desire to risk their lives. As Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland argued, "energies are directed toward survival, mass civil disobedience is reactive, and as a group, this population appears to lack the tools or social capital to act collectively to improve their status" (Haggard / Noland 2013: 51). Consequently, it is highly unlikely that in the coming years that there will be any organised dissent or political opposition in North Korea (Fifield 2017).

## Conclusion

In transitional North Korea, women's fashion has become the lens through which we can view the country's transformation. From the 1990s, with the emergence of the private markets necessary at the time for survival, women began to dress better and pay more attention to their fashion and beautification. Women's clothing shifted from state-sanctioned dress codes, with muted colours, to diverse individual choices of style, with more colours and textures. Despite these changes, there has been ongoing contestation between official sartorial discourse and women's daily practice. North Korean political leaders have considered clothing, notably women's clothing, a national project to construct loyal and disciplined citizens. Based on the assumption that women are more susceptible to the lure of Western and capitalist contamination, the political leaders have regulated women's dress codes by frequently issuing sartorial instructions.

Official sartorial discourses are concerned with socialist and nationalist femininity. Until recently, the North Korean state encouraged women to wear traditional clothing, particularly on special occasions, to contain the spread of clothing culture contaminated by Western and capitalist ideologies, and to preserve national purity. Many items that are deemed as Western/capital decadence have been banned and regulated.

North Korean official sartorial discourses are based on the essential notion of femininity. Unlike other socialist countries that promoted the gender-neutral style of military and work uniforms to display and cultivate disciplined desexualised subjects (Chen 2003), North Korean leaders have instructed that the uniforms should accentuate the feminine look. Although women were encouraged to participate in the workforce, to accomplish socialist revolution and progress, and the functionality of women's clothing was taken seriously, women were not, largely, allowed to wear trousers until recently.

Despite state regulations and control, for North Korean women, particularly young women living in big cities, dressing well has become a "must" to express individual identity and desire, and to signal social status. They have learned how to evade regulations and punishment through numerous tactics, particularly bribery. It is no exaggeration to say that corruption and bribes uphold the North Korean economy. Moreover, it is unlikely that women's desire to dress well and thus be "appealing" will weaken in the future. Women's fashion in North Korea is understood as an agentic process that challenges the dominant view that sees North Korean women as vulnerable or lacking agency; instead, it recognises women as agents of social change and questions what women's agency means in different social, political and cultural contexts.

Through the examination of how fashion trends in North Korea have shifted over time, we can better understand how women have adopted various non-socialist tactics to manipulate the system and the social order that have sought to control them. North Korean women have acted upon their agency carefully, getting what they can without risking the consequences of being seen as disrupting the status quo. This type of agency is not always understood by those who subscribe to Western liberal sensibilities of agency that embrace notions of individualism and personal freedom. The experience of North Korean women contributes to our understanding of what women can achieve in the extremely structurally limited circumstance of surviving within a system of oppression.

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# A Narrow Space for Rebellion: The Cultural T-shirt in China's 1990s

Juanjuan Wu

## Abstract

Following the crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, the beginning of the 1990s witnessed one of the few instances in modern Chinese history of the silenced making their voices heard – through printed messages on T-shirts. Phrases and sentences in large Chinese characters were printed on the front or back of plain white short-sleeve T-shirts with statements originating from a variety of sources, including literature, rock music, pop songs, movies, cartoons, old sayings and political slogans – or sometimes only an apparently meaningless assemblage of words. These phrases distanced the wearers from the earnest attitude that was promoted by the state, affording the wearer a sense of individual empowerment. This paper focuses on this cultural T-shirt fad of the 1990s in China and traces its rebellious origins, along with the multiple interpretations of its significance. This hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry relies on Chinese newspapers published at the time, as well as the researcher's own observations as a participant of this shared cultural experience. As a unisex sartorial symbol, the "cultural T-shirt" presented an open arena for both males and females, as well as a battleground over "spiritual pollution".

**Keywords:** China, fashion, clothing culture, cultural T-shirt, youth, non-verbal communication

## An evolving, complex Western cultural symbol

Likely a descendant of the T-shaped tunic worn in Europe during medieval times, the white cotton knitted T-shirt became an official undergarment for the United States Navy in 1913 (Sewell 2010). By the 1930s, US companies such as Sears, Roebuck & Co. and Hanes started to market T-shirts as both inner and outerwear (Harris 1996). In the post-World War II era, T-shirts expanded into sportswear, informal wear at home and workwear, due to their superior material functionality and adaptability (Sewell 2010). However, the basic, plain white T-shirt broke through its utilitarian role overnight when Marlon Brando wore it for his ground-breaking role in the 1951 film "A Streetcar Named Desire" (Kramer 2015). Brando's body-clinging, semi-transparent T-shirt gave the shirt a previously undiscovered erotic power as well as a rebellious edge, shaped by

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Brando's brooding attitude in the film (Kramer 2015, Sewell 2010). This rebellious, youthful spirit was embodied by the T-shirt in several influential film roles thereafter, with the seemingly modest and undistinguished white top often paired with blue jeans and a black leather jacket. With neither the rugged texture of jeans nor the shiny surface of the leather jacket, the soft, plain cotton-jersey T-shirt shockingly blended rebellion with fashion – a mix that proved contagious across younger generations, genders and nationalities.

Pop culture played a critical role in imbuing the proletarian plain white cotton Tee not only with rebellion and eroticism but also luxury (see Faiers 2016). Adding to the association of the garment with enigmatic silver-screen personas, the US popular media supplied interpretive or imaginative narratives to construct and enrich the cultural meaning of the plain T-shirt. In 1951, *Life* magazine announced that the T-shirt "had gone high fashion […] appearing on city streets and country club porches – and even at formal dances" (Harris 1996: 106).

From the 1960s onward, T-shirts metamorphosised into a popular vehicle for the delivery of commercial, political, social or personal messages to selected audiences or the public when adorned with promotional logos, graphic images, slogans, celebratory messages or cultural commentaries (Whittick 2021). Widely circulated messages ranged from "I Love New York" and "Make Love Not War" to "Save the Whales" (Sewell 2010). Not only did commercial entities find the communicative nature of T-shirts appealing, but various political and community events, civil, environmental and women's rights movements, and the burgeoning hippie subculture embraced T-shirt fashion. "By the 1980s, T-shirts were commonly designed and used to express affiliations, advertising, proverbs, protests, violence, vulgarity, music, movies, as well as political and social attitudes, school loyalty, vacation destinations, taste in music or food and one's sense of humor" (Presley / Jenkins 2011: 142). By that time, T-shirts had broken the boundaries of gender, age, class, body type and formality and were worn in the West in all walks of life.

Clearly, the journey of the T-shirt from its working class and military roots to its symbolisation of youth and hippie culture to permeating high fashion presents a complex and somewhat contradictory image. The blend of purity with eroticism, patriotism with rebellion, proletarianism with luxuriousness makes the T-shirt a truly versatile form not only in a physical sense but also symbolically. In this regard, T-shirts encapsulate the ambiguous nature of fashion. Fashion's message has always been ambiguous, intentionally or unintentionally. The essential messages that fashion communicates about wealth and class in modern times are rarely that straightforward. Even in the case of branded fashion with conspicuous logos, the social status of these logos is only understood by those with a certain level of fashion awareness or knowledge. The pursuit of one's ability to decipher fashion messages masked in the layers of fabrics constitutes an ultimate attraction for fashion. At times, this ability, representing

"taste", can socially outweigh one's financial ability to acquire refined and embellished materials.

Fashion's inherent ambiguity was redefined when messages on T-shirts appeared. These messages are extremely explicit in the meaning they are designed to communicate, leaving no room for ambiguity except when ambiguity is intended. This explicit nature of message T-shirts is certainly unique in the history of fashion. In the pre-Internet era, T-shirts provided a democratic, reader to reader (R2R) communication platform with an open-ended possibility for readership. The uncertainty of whom the T-shirt messages would end up reaching often added to the excitement of exposing one's inner self to the public eye. The limited space on a T-shirt also requires that the message be short, witty and readable from a distance, providing it with some of the characteristics of Twitter and thus a similar outcome for achieving popularity. The strong visual and psychological impact of these moving tweets on individual bodies quickly wove through the social fabric of the West and crossed national borders.

## A brief note on methodology

This paper focuses on the Chinese T-shirt fad of the 1990s and traces the evolution of its cultural meaning in its original context. This fad demonstrated a short-lived empowerment that ordinary Chinese found in creating and using a visual symbol that was distinctively against the dressing norm. With the aim of deciphering the dynamic evolution of the multiple meanings of the T shirt phenomenon, this paper employs hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology as its primary inquiry method. This qualitative research method is suited for research questions that seek to understand the meaning of human experience (Crist / Tanner 2003, Laverty 2003). I critically analysed narratives identified in Chinese newspapers and academic journals published from 1991 to 1994, at the time of or shortly after the T-shirt fad. These Chinese publications are an integral part of this T-shirt phenomenon as they played a critical gatekeeping role and thus shaped Chinese behaviours.

Rather than collecting the kind of quantitative "factual data" that positivistic inquiries rely on (Cerbone 2013), this paper attempts to uncover the layers of nuanced meanings, conflicting interpretations and diverse perspectives of the T-shirt phenomenon as a shared cultural experience. Narratives that reflected these lived experiences, along with a myriad of their iterations, were collected by the author in both English and Chinese. Photos from that time-period were also reviewed as a triangulation method. In fact, redundance was observed in both the types of T-shirt messages and themes of newspaper articles that attempted to guide Chinese thinking and practices. In conjunction with the author's

first-hand observations as a participant of this shared cultural experience, these narratives served as the primary data for this interpretive analysis. In this sense, the author also utilised ethnographic methods with rich and versatile data from multiple sources (Fetterman 2020). The paper aims to gain a holistic understanding of this complex, culturally contextualised phenomenon as well as making inter-cultural and temporal comparisons.

## The birth of a Chinese rebel Tee

Beginning in the early 20th century, T-shirts, as an imported dress form, were used as plain undershirts called *hanshan* in China (literally meaning "undershirts that absorb sweat"; Bian 2014). They shared the modest roots of Western T-shirts. However, in China they did not go through the series of cultural transformations of T-shirts in the West. The T-shirt's first appearance as outerwear in China was in the form of message T-shirts from overseas in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This was once again a completely foreign idea. They appeared with printed English or "Chinglish" with or without graphics as a unisex item of clothing with a roomy cut. Most of the T-shirt's complex Western cultural associations (e.g., patriotism, rebellion and eroticism) were lost in translation. The shirt arrived as a novel form of fashion that was waiting to be stamped with Chinese character(s) and was subsequently dubbed the *wenhua shan* ("cultural T-shirt"). At first, only urban youth had access to imported fashions but this geographical class demarcation blurred once an abundant supply of locally produced cultural T-shirts became widely accessible, largely thanks to the booming street-vendor economy.

As a fashion form, cultural T-shirts were sought after more for their expressiveness than for their utility. Only young people with the strong desire and enough courage to express themselves would don these T-shirts, which often displayed frowned-upon messages. The T-shirt messages, from a Western point of view, were perhaps harmless and thus entertaining. But in the aftermath of the events of 4 June 1989 on Tiananmen Square, not only was the mainstream media extremely cautious about what was communicated with and among the public, the average person also had a heightened political sensitivity. Explicit messages carrying negative emotions certainly challenged the psychological comfort zone of most social conservatives, let alone the government.

In the summer of 1991, the so-called cultural T-shirt fad swept through Beijing and quickly spread to metropolitan areas, such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Tianjin and Shenyang. These T-shirts, a localised version of the imported message T-shirts, featured messages in Chinese, with some accompanied by graphics. They quickly attracted attention for the cynical, humorous, vulgar or "negative" moods they

communicated. Though the rebelliousness of the fad was short-lived (mainly due to governmental intervention), this form of explicit self-expression can be spotted ever since, leaving a unique impression on the history of contemporary Chinese fashion.

Fashion has demonstrated its resilience in the face of government repression at various times in the sartorial history of both the West and the East. The spirit of rebellion highlights fashion's many memorable moments and forms. Rebellion marks an intentional, and in some cases, a forceful departure from existing social norms, and thus introduces new concepts, forms, values and ways of social interaction. The defining feature of fashion[1] – change – is precisely the result of "rebellious" dress choices. In that sense, rebellion is not a new element of fashion but an inherent quality. Often, compromised versions of the initial rebellious forms survive longer as they reflect the outcome of negotiations between individual interests and various social, political and economic forces. The extreme sarcasm, venting of frustrations and feelings of failure, as well as overt sexual depictions, that appeared on the T-shirts in China subsided after they were officially banned.

The investigations of Wang Lin (1992), a journalist at the *Beijing Qingnian Bao* (*Beijing Youth Newspaper*), found that the cultural T-shirt was an invention inspired by message T-shirts from overseas: it was a journalist and a recent college graduate who designed and produced the first batch of these cultural T-shirts. They were first printed with emotionally loaded messages such as, *fan zhuo ne, bie li wo* ("Leave me alone, I am fed up"), *la jia dai kou* ("My big family depends on me") or *zuo huai bu luan* ("I couldn't even be seduced by a woman sitting on my lap"), which was illustrated with nude male and female figures. In some cases, street vendors handwrote any words that came to the customers' minds at the point of sale. It was creative folk writing manifested in innovative fashion forms. Quite clearly, the phenomenon started with a mostly apolitical motive that sought to cash in on Chinese desires for both self-expression and novel fashion forms. This fashion invention was not an issue, at least not a political one, until its overwhelming popularity made it an effective channel for uncensored public communication. These printed messages were consumed quickly, displaying easily transmissible emotions of disappointment, frustration, unhappiness or despair, mostly expressed in sarcastic or witty phrases (see Table 1).

1 In this paper "fashion" is used within the realm of dress. Note that the word "fashion" is also popularly used to indicate changes in modes of thought and design of other consumer products as well as clothes (see Eicher 2010).

Table 1: Popular phrases on cultural T-shirts

| Front of T-shirt | |
|---|---|
| Leave me alone, I am fed up | There is no way out |
| I am just sick of everything | My future is not a dream |
| My big family depends on me | I only follow my feelings |
| If you are unlucky, do not blame society | |
| I couldn't even be seduced by a woman sitting on my lap | |
| If you are ill-fated, do not blame the government | |
| I don't know how to please people | I did not offend anybody |
| Nothing to my name | I am kind but am always at a loss |
| I am ugly, but I am gentle | I am a tiny, tiny birdie |
| Don't ask me, I know nothing | Getting rich is all there is |
| God is dead | We are still alive |
| Boring | Really exhausted |
| Shut up | Kiss me |
| Teasing you | Don't forget me |
| Treat comrades like the breeze in spring | Fill the world with love |
| Only mom is the best in this whole world | |
| Heaven has endowed me with talents for eventual use | |
| Money is not almighty, but without money, nothing is all righty | |

| Front of T-shirt |
| --- |
| It is not that I do not understand, it is the world that changes too quickly |
| Black cat, white cat; it doesn't matter as long as it catches mice |
| We, your sisters and brothers, cannot tolerate sand in our eyes |
| A single spark can light a prairie fire |
| I eat apple and you eat apple skin |
| Serve the people |
| Sweep away all pests |
| Money, money, money |
| Sour, sweet, bitter, spicy |
| A true heart |
| Beef potatoes |
| Spy |
| Firstly, I am not afraid of bitterness, secondly, I am not afraid of death, thirdly, I am not afraid of you |

| Front of T-shirt | Back of T-shirt |
| --- | --- |
| Make sure you do not fall in love with me | I have no money |
| I have only one shortcoming | That is sincerity |
| Sorry, I quit drinking | Well, I only take one drink |
| I want to have a banquet | Who would treat me? |
| Open your arms | You've got nothing |
| Playing just for the thrill... | Of being a vendor at the flea market |

Source: Compiled by author, according to Liu 1991, Schell 1992, Wang 1992, Jiao 1992, Wu 2009.

Runming Jiao (1992) sorted popular cultural T-shirt messages into five categories of self-expression, which I further expand upon and modify as follows:

1) Expressing one's lonely, noble soul. People scorned the deteriorating, money-centred morals of the day in phrases such as *qian qian qian* ("Money, money, money") or *shangdi sile* ("God is dead"). They distanced themselves, either willingly or unwillingly, from the strong currents of economic advancement and strived to preserve some level of moral purity, as displayed in phrases like *geer men jieer men yanli burou shazi* ("We, your sisters and brothers, cannot tolerate sand in our eyes").

2) Feelings of losing a sense of self and belonging. Amid exploding consumerism, feelings of individual disempowerment and misplacement prevailed. While a select few were growing rich, many felt left behind materially and deprived spiritually, as shown in phrases such as *bushi wo bu mingbai, shi shijie bianhua taikuai* ("It is not that I do not understand, it is the world that changes too quickly"), or *biewen wo, wo shenme dou buzhidao* ("Don't ask me, I know nothing").

3) Cynicism. Cynicism was manifested in the deliberate use of vulgar or offensive language, such as *meijin* ("Boring)", *bizui* ("Shut up"), or *banshi bu songli buxing, ke songleli ye weibi neng bancheng shi* ("Nothing can be done without gift giving, but gift giving cannot guarantee anything").

4) Romanticised depictions of love, youth and innocence, particularly by young women. Favoured phrases included *wo shige xiaoxiao niao* ("I am a tiny, tiny birdie"), *wen wo* ("Kiss me") or *wuwang wo* ("Don't forget me").

5) Longing for group affiliation and a better future: *rang shijie chongman ai* ("Fill the world with love") or *feng yu tong zhou* ("Stand together through storm and stress").

However, based on the phrases collected in Table 1, two more categories can be added to the above list:

6) Nonsense words. Seemingly nonsensical words used to express coolness or a carefree outlook, or for entertainment in a subtly cynical way, such as *mitan* ("Spy") or *tudou shao niurou* ("Beef potatoes").

7) Quotations from popular songs, slogans, sayings of political leaders or model workers. In some cases, these phrases can be interpreted either in a supportive or a satirical tone, which shall be elaborated below.

One example of a song lyric repurposed as a T-shirt slogan is "Nothing to My Name", a song written and sung by Cui Jian, marking the birth of Chinese rock and roll (Sebag-Montefiore 2014). Though the lyrics depict love, the great popularity of the song can be attributed mainly to, first, its audacious attitude toward the individual self. This individualistic angle greatly deviated from the collectivist, socialist norm that stressed the virtue of individual sacrifice for the

country. Second, there is the loud, assertive presentation of the self from an overtly negative stance. The public sphere in China was customarily reserved for sharing positive feelings, achievements or optimism, especially in the social milieu cultivated and controlled by the Communist Party. Thus, the individuality and negativity expressed in this song, though directed toward a rather private subject (love), signalled rebellion and resonated with the young. Unsurprisingly, it became the anthem of the June Fourth movement of 1989, which further enhanced its anti-establishment connotations. The song was thus a "subliminal message" about China's lack of freedom (Matusitz 2010). In addition, Cui Jian's unconventional dress, his hoarse voice and the song's rhythm accentuated the rebellion expressed in the lyrics (ibid.). Needless to say, the spirit of this song aligned neatly with that of cultural T-shirts: the courage to publicise individual feelings, angst, frustrations and dreams.

Widely circulated lyrics that appeared on cultural T-shirts also included *wode weilai bushi meng* ("My future is not a dream"; see Figure 1) and *genzhuo ganjue zou* ("I only follow my feelings"; see Figure 2). These are more mellow and lighter songs, popularised by Zhang Yusheng and Su Rui, respectively. Both are Taiwanese singers. They shared the central themes of the cultural T-shirts in terms of centring individual feelings on the map of socially communicable signs. The lyrics of these songs also touch on freedom, self-expression and hope, all prominent themes of the cultural T-shirts of the time.

A variety of other phrases came from sayings of political figures, e.g., Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping or model workers like Lei Feng, such as *dui tongzhi xiang chuntian yiyang wennuan* ("Treat comrades like the breeze in spring"), *buguan heimao baimao, neng zhuadao laoshu jiushi haomao* ("Black cat, white cat – It doesn't matter as long as it catches mice"), or *wei renmin fuwu* ("Serve the people"). These were likely emulations of Cui Jian's enigmatic mix of rock and roll with Maoist accessories worn by the Red Guard. The intent of such repackaged messages can be interpreted in two completely opposite ways. At face value, as authoritarian propaganda, they appear politically correct. But they could also be interpreted as the disguised social satire favoured by politi cal dissidents and grey culturalists (see Schell 1992). This ambiguity shielded these fashion messages to some extent from censorship and thus enhanced their appeal and popularity.

Some phrases added to or slightly modified heroic or political slogans, such as *yi bu paku, er bu pasi, san bu pani* ("Firstly, I am not afraid of bitterness. Secondly, I am not afraid of death. Thirdly, I am not afraid of you"). The original slogan "Firstly, I am not afraid of bitterness. Secondly, I am not afraid of death" was published by Renmin Daily in 1965 to stimulate heroism and patriotism and call on the people to sacrifice for the country. The added portion ("I am not afraid of you") once again could be read in opposing ways: the toughness and determination communicated in the original phrase can be car-

ried over to the wearer, but the pronoun "you" might also be interpreted as the political authorities. In that case, this toughness and determination totally change their target and purpose.


Figure 1: The cultural T-shirt message reads *wo de weilai bushi meng* ("My future is not a dream"). Photo taken in the early 1990s in Beijing by and courtesy of Li Xiaobin.

Figure 2: The cultural T-shirt message reads *genzhuo ganjue zou* ("I only follow my feelings"). Photo taken in the early 1990s in Beijing by and courtesy of Li Xiaobin.

## A narrow space for rebellion

These widely circulated T-shirt messages instantly alarmed the authorities that monitored trade. Holding stability as its core principle, the government was suspicious of anything that was capable of mobilising the masses or anything that attracted wide public attention, due to its potential for disrupting the social or political equilibrium. News reports from Taiwan and overseas interpreted the T-shirt slogans as expressions of dissatisfaction with and silent protests against the government (see Wang 1992). At this point the issue had already crossed the border of fashion into the nation itself. Media attention from overseas elevated the fashion controversy to a matter of political and foreign affairs, which made governmental intervention more likely. The issue was dealt with promptly by the Beijing Administration for Industry and Commerce, which began to confiscate and ban the products, fine vendors and appeal to the public to refrain from wearing these cultural T-shirts. In addition, the journalist and student who first developed these T-shirts were detained (Wang 1992, Schell 1992). However, as Lin Wang (1992) observed, governmental intervention also resulted in a backlash, resulting in a doubling or tripling of the prices of the T-shirts on the underground market.

Mainstream newspapers such as the *Economic Daily* employed a critical tone, as in the opinion piece published in July 1991 by Ya Rong (1991) entitled "This 'Cultural T-shirt' Phenomenon". It refuted the view that these T-shirt

messages should be treated as a private matter, a question of harmless, self-effacing entertainment. The author argued that these cultural T-shirts had crossed the boundary of dress and become a form of "cultural pollution", selling ideas that were counterproductive to China's reform. Rong also expressed concerns over how these T-shirts might affect China's image abroad. Thus, he called for the intervention of the "relevant entities" to ensure that the designers and producers of cultural T-shirts abide by their "social responsibilities". Similar opinions were also expressed in Yi Xian's (1991) "Worrisome Cultural T-shirts" in the *China Youth Daily* and in Yushi Mu's (1991) "'The Cultural T-shirt' and 'Anti-Culture'" in the Beijing *Youth Daily*, both also published in July of 1991, confirming this as the peak time of popularity of cultural T-shirts and the beginning of governmental intervention. As Yi Xian put it:

> Desires for novel and differentiable forms of dress are justifiable. But the current cultural T-shirts on the streets are beyond the realm of adornment. What they express is a kind of cultural consciousness that is out of sync with our societal milieu. Other than contagious decadent emotions, what else can you gain from these dark, murky, passive and cynical words? They reflect neither our national spirit nor any meaningful pursuit of beauty. Regarding our country, there are certainly unsatisfactory aspects of our spiritual or material living conditions. Needless to say, it is also a known fact that all our people are pulling together to achieve the four modernisations, which is our national goal. Thus, any forms of promotion or exaggeration of certain negative factors, especially the use of cultural T-shirts to spread their effects, go against our current cultural atmosphere. (Xian 1991)

Considering the close publication dates and formulaic writing, this wave of criticism in July of 1991 might have been a coordinated effort from the highest levels of state media. Though the three aforementioned opinion pieces were not identical, the similarity of their arguments invites a reasonable suspicion of the claimed identity of the authors. The names of these authors resembled the preferred pennames of the editorial teams of the newspapers, with meanings conveying either a moral or a nationalist connotation.[2] Moreover, all of them were published in a section featuring essay contests, likely disguised as voices of readers. The three essays all began in a similar fashion, detailing an unexpected encounter with a cultural T-shirt and its cynical, mocking or nonsensical message. The authors then acknowledged the right of individuals to choose how to dress themselves via the pursuit of fashion. This acknowledgement was in line with the state promotion of the "emancipation of the mind" at the time, which greatly relaxed control over what ordinary Chinese chose to wear. However, the authors then proceeded to argue that the cultural T-shirts were more than a matter of fashion, which, in their view, was synonymous with beautifying the body. Criticism of the misalignment of the T-shirt slogans with the proper optimistic attitudes toward the nation's political and economic agen-

2 One of the names, Yi Xian, for instance, could mean "righteousness" and "obligations". Another name, Ya Rong, could mean "glorious Asia" or "making Asia prosperous".

das followed. Mu further asserted that "from that silent teasing, people sense a sulking rage. It uses dark humour to blaspheme and mock beauty, elegance and all of our established values. In this sense, the 'cultural T-shirts' reflect an 'anti-culture' attitude" (Mu 1991). Thus, the authors stressed the urgency of governmental intervention in the production and circulation of cultural T-shirts. Furthermore, the young wearers were told to face the reality of hardship instead of escaping into a fantasyland.

Given that the wearers of cultural T-shirts were mainly fashion-seeking youth who merely chased fads for the thrill and without ill intent, the tone of the criticism was generally mild. All three authors referenced the West. Both Xian (1991) and Rong (1991) pointed out that Western T-shirts in China were printed with images of the American Stars and Stripes, the rising sun of Japan or the Union Jack but never with the Chinese flag, an omission that was also viewed as somewhat problematic. The authors' (misguided) perception of T-shirts as a symbol of patriotism in the West was held up as a positive example for Chinese youth to imitate. In this case, the supposed Western example was not to be blamed; it was the imitator, who deviated from the "intended" patriotic use of the T-shirts. However, Mu (1991) argued that the cultural T-shirt phenomenon was part of a shared, anti-establishment, rebellious mindset of the twentieth century, as manifested in art or social movements, such as Dada and the hippie movement; only the wealthy West, the writer insisted, could afford to let their people indulge themselves in the "luxury" of rebelling without a cause.

Most interestingly, in June of 1991, when cultural T-shirts were first discussed in the Chinese media, the reports were promotional instead of critical. A piece entitled "'Cultural T-shirt': The Hottest", authored and photographed by journalist Liu Xi (1991), was published by *China Youth Daily*. The same kind of T-shirt messages – e.g., "I am fed up, leave me alone", "My big family depends on me" or "sour, sweet, bitter, spicy" – were generously interpreted as a way to release stress, balance the mind, laugh at failure and tolerate others. The author regarded the exaggeration expressed in these messages as a form of humour. Similarly, Li (1991) observed various new fashions through a positive lens in "Let Your Pizzazz and Coolness Shine", published by *Beijing Youth Daily* in June 1991. Though the round-neck white T-shirt[3] was thought by the wearer's parents to be too showy and might leave a bad impression at work, the author defended the wearer's decision to adopt this refreshing and lively new fashion. Though the media generally took a pro-fashion stance in the 1990s, scorn was occasionally expressed over imported fashions or styles that were deemed a form of "spiritual pollution", as in the case of imported T-shirts. A commentary entitled "Foreign Decorations and Your Worth" (Luo 1991) in the *China Youth*

3 Based on the timeline suggested by Wang (1992), the beginning of June 1991 marks the first appearance of cultural T-shirts on the market. Thus, the round-neck white T-shirt mentioned in this piece is likely not the cultural T-shirts, but a precedent form.

*Daily* derided T-shirts printed with English that the wearer, attempting to display a sense of superiority, actually failed to understand – such as "Big mate" or "HardWard".[4] And the author ridiculed a consumption attitude that blindly favoured anything imported from overseas.

Table 2: Sample publications in Chinese newspapers on T-shirt fashion in the early 1990s

| Publication Date | Publication Title | Publication Source |
|---|---|---|
| 12 May 1991 | "Foreign Decorations" and Your Worth | *China Youth Daily* |
| 4 June 1991 | Let Your Pizzazz and Coolness Shine | *Beijing Youth Daily* |
| 25 June 1991 | "Cultural T-shirts": The Hottest | *China Youth Daily* |
| 11 July 1991 | This "Cultural T-shirt" Phenomenon | *Economic Daily* |
| 17 July 1991 | Worrisome Cultural T-shirts | *China Youth Daily* |
| 19 July 1991 | The "Cultural T-shirt" and "Anti-Culture" | *Beijing Youth Daily* |
| 31 August 1992 | Rock and Roll on the Round-Neck T-shirts | *Beijing Evening News* |
| 1992 | The "Cultural T-shirt" Phenomenon in the Capital Bejing in 1991 | *Youth Study* |
| 1992 | Investigation into the Development of Youth Pop Culture: Starting from the "Cultural T-shirt" Phenomenon | *Youth Study* |
| 1994 | Cultural T-shirts: A Deep View into the Hearts of the Youth | *China Soft Science* |

Source: Compiled by author, critical publications are shaded in grey.

By the summer of 1992, criticisms of cultural T-shirts had largely faded away. Promotional, investigative or explanatory essays on the topic could still be found in various sources ranging from newspapers to academic papers. The evolving attitude of the media toward this phenomenon was clearly shown in the titles of the publications shown in Table 2. Several factors might have contributed

4 Likely a misspelled word for "Harvard" or "Hardware". The author of the commentary translated it as "hardware" in Chinese.

to this turnaround. First, the exponential growth in the number of T-shirt messages made it pointless to implement the initial ban on the 34 specific messages (Wang 1992). There was a lack of explicit criteria to judge the newly invented messages from a legal standpoint. Second, even within the government, opposing viewpoints existed over how the cultural T-shirt phenomenon should be handled.

One viewpoint supported the banning of these T-shirts because they besmirched the image of the nation and corrupted socialist morals, but it was also recognised that this approach would not completely erase people's negative emotions. Another viewpoint regarded the cultural T-shirts as a true expression of real feelings and thus an effective channel for the government to understand its people (Wang 1992). There was also the opinion that one should acknowledge the right of the individual to make fashion choices to express one's personality or even to vent negative feelings (Jiao 1991). Jiao (1991) further emphasised the increasingly prevalent use of cultural T-shirts to enthusiastically promote patriotism and socialist morals or to proudly identify with one's social group.

Thus, instead of rejecting cultural T-shirts, many embraced them for constructing an "upright" image. This attempt "to repackage traditional Marxist messages in pop-culture wrappings" (Schell 1992) is a common strategy of the state to acculturate any new forms of social invention. These repurposed uses of the cultural T-shirt by individuals or government-affiliated entities, such as the military, universities, media groups, etc., greatly diluted the rebellious messages that initially made a strong impression. Even though cultural T-shirts continued to be worn, the rebellious aspect of the fad faded. For this very reason cultural T-shirts lost their appeal to fashion innovators, and the threat they posed to social stability was neutralised. Thereafter, cultural T-shirts found their freedom to express individuality only within the confines of social appropriateness and political correctness.

Cultural T-shirts had much in common with the big posters of Chinese characters of the "Democracy Wall" movement in 1978: both represented young voices from the grassroots finding unexpected avenues of expression, representing desires for both freedom of speech and influence in the public arena. Though the two movements/fads had distinctively different motives (i.e., political vs. financial), both were short-lived rebellions. Interestingly, the big character poster movement, which explicitly expressed grassroots criticism of the political system and supported individual rights,[5] was at first tolerated by the authorities, perhaps in the interest of the newly issued calls to "emancipate the mind" by the Deng regime, as well as its aim of maintaining an open-minded image. The cultural T-shirt phenomenon was scrutinised with the same criteria: on the one hand, the principle of anti-Westernisation was not to be challenged in political or

5 According to Lei Guang (1996), in the Democracy Wall movement young activists held the view that democracy was a necessary condition for the nation's power and prosperity. Thus, it was more nationalistically than democratically motivated. Only a few activists marginally emphasised individual rights.

social spheres; on the other hand, minds needed to be emancipated and bodies refashioned to revive the economy and align with the reformist image. However, as there were no explicit criteria for judging what was intrinsically Western and what could be safely acculturated to fit a socialist agenda, controversies, negotiations and struggles arose in the creation and adoption of new ideas and forms of fashion.

## Gendered choices of T-shirt messages

Though the T-shirt is a gender-neutral garment in terms of cut, colour and fabric, young Chinese females and males indicated their gender preferences via their T-shirt messages. Instead of expressing cynicism or negative emotions, women tended to choose romantic or cute messages, such as "I am a tiny, tiny birdie", "I am an innocent little girl", "Kiss me", "Don't forget me" (Wang 1991, Jiao 1991) and "Teasing you" (see Figure 3).

Despite being worn on female bodies, these were nothing like the feminist messages one would encounter on any Western T-shirts, which often challenged the status of women, although they were frequently criticised as commodifying deep sociopolitical issues. In an analytical essay on "the meaning of the feminist T-shirt" Trine Kvidal-Røvik (2018) argued that through their placement on a fashion item (with its inherent ambiguity), sociocultural messages were able to reach places normally unreachable by other forms of sociopolitical resistance precisely because of the identity of their fashion "host". However, in the case of Chinese cultural T-shirts, messages favoured by urban women went against the idea of "everyday forms of resistance" (see Scott 1985). These cultural messages worn by Chinese women appeared playful, light-hearted or even flirty.

It seemed to be a natural choice of young women, who took a more restrained approach, to release bottled-up emotions onto T-shirts. Compared with men, they were more used to hiding their emotions, as the public sphere had never been a level playing field on which they could showcase their wisdom, creativity or true feelings. In addition to feeling less ownership of the public sphere, women were further confined by the predominant social attitudes about proper womanhood: an emphasis on endurance and sacrifice that was in sharp contrast to the self-indulgent enjoyment or complaints that were the prevailing sentiments initially carried by cultural T-shirts. Most women habitually removed themselves from the forefront of confrontation with political or societal problems. Women's cultural T-shirts were thus more "fashion" focused, featuring less controversial and more commodified messages.

This public sharing of a slice of the romantic self by women via T-shirts was positively interpreted, as it corresponded with the common understanding of

contemporary femininity in China. By this time, women had made a new return to their non-confrontational and instrumental role thanks to fashion, to some extent. Serious debates over how fashion might objectify or enslave women were also hard to find. Systemised promotion of the extreme sensuality and desirability of fashion became the norm, fuelled by a booming fashion industry. Young women who were addicted to fashion gave no thought to the question of whether they were adorning their bodies for men or for themselves. What was ultimately important was whether the fashions they wore were the latest, the priciest and the most desired – much as the former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping had dismissed the legitimacy of the question of whether a market economy belonged to capitalism or socialism. In the end, urban women's growing power in both the family and society simultaneously fed into the independent image of fashion, while fashion rewarded them in turn with a sense of individual empowerment.

Men also indulged themselves in the pursuit of the latest fashions, as well as in getting their kids into the best schools and purchasing the most desired flats. The government seemed to be steering society as a whole in the direction of consumerism, quite possibly via various political slogans promoted at different times, such as "focusing on the central task of economic development", "avoid self-inflicted setbacks" and "harmonious society". The rapid growth of material wealth anaesthetised most Chinese and gave them a false sense of empowerment. The relaxation of controls over fashion further enhanced this sense of empowerment for both men and women.


Figure 3: The cultural T-shirt message on the girl reads *dou ni wan* ("Teasing you"), the one on the boy *wo dengshang le Nantianmen* ("I have been to Nantianmen"). Photo taken in the early 1990s in Beijing by and courtesy of Li Xiaobin.

## Conclusion

The cultural T-shirt phenomenon perfectly embodied the ideological struggle over the extent to which Chinese could comfortably Westernise, both in terms of outward appearance and inward spirit. Though the journalist who first produced these cultural T-shirts did mention that the creation of the fashion was in part motivated by the events of June Fourth (Wang 1992), the cultural T-shirts were primarily used by youth as a novel form of communication, an outlet for individualistic expressions of emotions, frustrations, dissatisfaction, grievances, aspirations, humour and love. This fad was interpreted as a "youth rebellion" because the cynical image depicted on the cultural T-shirts deviated from the optimistic, reformist image that was promoted by the government – which resulted in their official ban. In this sense, the cultural T-shirts were a tool, disguised as fashion, for youth to resist and reject the government-prescribed "positive" image. It was a tool that empowered Chinese fashion consumers as creative individuals to acquire an uncensored platform (at least initially) through which to communicate their otherwise neglected feelings. It also served as a refreshing outlet of self-expression for those who felt adrift and alienated in the currents of economic reform.

The singular importance assigned to economic development and the acquisition of wealth in the 1990s, coupled with the fact that fashion's inherent ambiguity provided a sort of shield against moral attacks, led to increasing freedom in the field of fashion. Dress became more revealing and transparent on the body and increasingly sexualised and provocative on the pages of magazines. It seemed as though moral decadence in fashion was no longer a red line, at least not in terms of the endless pursuit of global luxuries or the encroachment of sexuality into public spaces. But fashion's invasion into the political sphere, as was the case of cultural T-shirts (interpreted as a form of criticism or protest against the government) clearly crossed the line. The cultural T-shirt, as well as similar examples of self-expression, such as the Democracy Wall, was only one of the many conditioned stimuli that could evoke a nearly guaranteed response from the authorities. This demonstrated the continuing power dynamic between the state and the people. Chinese youth rebellion leaked through the tightened fist of the censoring party into fashion, rock-and-roll and other forms of pop art. As in the song "Nothing to My Name", perhaps even something initially intended as apolitical could end up being interpreted politically and thus enhance its appeal as a symbol of social rebellion among the youth.

Nevertheless, the cultural T-shirt phenomenon represented a short-lived empowerment of young individuals who fashionably resisted the prescribed upright image. This phenomenon simultaneously signalled the end of the idealistic era of the 1980s and the beginning of an era of Chinese "entertainment spirit" from

the 1990s onward. The spirit of criticism and rebellion that attracted intellectuals in the 1980s was manifested in certain genres of literature (such as *shanghen wenxue* ("scar literature") and *menglong shi* ("misty poems"); see Chen / Song 2000) and in the feverish absorption of Western philosophies.

But under tightened control in the aftermath of June Fourth, critical and rebellious spirits co-opted the various forms of entertainment to give birth to a new zeitgeist. This new entertainment spirit presented itself in shadowy, cynical and humorous forms in visual, verbal and non-verbal fields, such as literature (e.g., novelist Wang Shuo), cinema (e.g., actor and director Zhou Xingchi), fashion (e.g., cultural T-shirts) and, more recently, on social media. When the realm of politics was not a viable creative outlet, Chinese indulged themselves in other forms of creation, including fashion, which was perhaps an area that had the least political surveillance. But when politics began to encroach upon fashion, it was not surprising that Chinese fashionistas quickly replaced subversive cultural T-shirt messages with conspicuously placed luxury brand logos in that deeply commodified and apolitical period in China of the early 2000s, before the country began to lurch back towards Mao in the Xi era.

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# Rice Paddles and Pink Helmets
## Framing Gendered Resistance in 20th Century Japan

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## Abstract

Two Japanese women's organisations – Shufuren, founded in 1948 and still in existence, and Chūpiren, founded in 1972 and disbanded in 1977 – appear to be vastly different from one another. And yet, they had one critical similarity: their use of accessories to make a political point. Shufuren members were advocates for consumer rights (and in the immediate postwar era, for food availability). Since then, they have demonstrated for such political issues as food safety, recycling, environmental protection and anti-nuclear energy, all in the name of their roles as wives and mothers. When demonstrating, they always appear bearing large mock-ups of the rice paddle used in Japan to scoop rice from the cooking pot. The rice paddle was a powerful symbol of women's domestic and political strength. Chūpiren women, on the other hand, distinguished themselves in their advocacy of reproductive rights not only by their forcefulness but also by wearing pink helmets. Chūpiren saw value in street theatre and sensationalism. No other radical feminist group in the mid-1970s wore uniforms. The media at that time mocked Chūpiren's helmets and attention-grabbing tactics, and in the process disparaged contemporary feminism as a whole.

**Keywords:** Japan, Shufuren, Chūpiren, women's organisations, second wave feminism, feminist consumer activism, media representation, accessories, semiotics of dress

At first glance, two postwar Japanese women's organisations, Shufuren and Chūpiren, could not appear to be more different from one another. Shufuren – the title is an abbreviation of its original name Nihon Shufurengōkai (Japan Federation of Housewives' Associations) – is now subtitled on its English-language website as the Association of Consumer Organisations, reflecting its evolution as an organisation dedicated to improving the lives of women and society through housewife-activists' roles as consumers and citizens. Founded in 1948 during the post-World War II years of poverty and deprivation, Shufuren is still active today, although with far fewer members than it had at its peak in the immediate postwar years. Chūpiren – an abbreviation of Chūzetsu Kinshi Hō ni Hantai shi Piru no Zenmenkaikin o Yōkyū suru Josei Kaihō Rengō (Women's Liberation

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Federation for Opposing the Abortion Law and for the Complete Legalisation of the Contraceptive Pill) – was established in 1972 and disbanded in 1977. As its name implies, it focused on reproductive rights. Despite the clear differences between the organisations, this article will show that they shared one notable feature – they publicised their actions through signature accessories.

Normally, contemporary historians try to avoid attributing major events or institutions in the past to one or just a few individuals. In the cases of Shufuren and Chūpiren and their uses of symbolic accessories, however, the individual founders, acting in the changing contexts of their times, were closely identified with their movements. And the representations of those movements are closely linked to their founders' experiences. Thus, this article devotes attention to the leaders – especially Oku Mumeo (1895–1997) of the long-lived Shufuren, but also Enoki Misako (born in 1945) of Chūpiren – and the accessories they chose as symbols of their movements.

Though founded by prominent pre-World War II feminist Oku Mumeo, Shufuren did not initially claim to be a feminist organisation, but rather a group of committed women, organised as women and especially as women in households, who advocated for consumer rights (and in the immediate postwar era, for consumer necessities such as food and household items). In the three-quarters of a century since then, they have organised and demonstrated for such political issues as food safety, recycling, environmental protection, international peace, protection of small businesses and anti-nuclear energy, under the rubric of their relational roles as wives and mothers and to signify and enhance their roles as enfranchised citizens. Women voted for the first time in national elections in 1946, just two years before the founding of Shufuren, a fact that did not escape the notice of its members, particularly because founder Oku Mumeo herself was elected to Japan's parliament in 1947.

When carrying out protests in the streets, Shufuren members could often be seen bearing huge mock-ups of the *shamoji*, the paddle traditionally used to scoop rice from the cooking pot and distribute it in appropriate measure to one's family. The *shamoji* used in the home is a large spoon with an almost flat bowl. As can be seen in Figure 1, Shufuren's mock-ups of this kitchen tool could be used as placards large enough to carry a message. Serving rice within the family was a sign not of subordination but of household authority. In the pre-World War II period it was a symbol of the household matriarch's control and maintenance of the family's resources.[1] The written characters for "housewife" are literally *shu* (main or primary) and *fu* (woman), and a woman gained the power and status of the *shufu* in the household when the rice paddle was passed to her by the previous matriarch (Segawa 1978: 1–9). Although most early Shu-

1 Naoko Komori connects the early modern housewife's control of the *shamoji* to her control of household accounting as well (Komori 2008: 333).

furen members may not have called themselves feminists, they did practice gendered resistance, using their social position as empowered wives and mothers. The rice paddle – and the kitchen-style aprons some of them wore over their street clothes in the early postwar years (Robins-Mowry 1983: 199) – made this clear to the members of the public that witnessed their demonstrations in the streets and viewed photos that Shufuren leaders knew would appear in the newspapers shortly after the demonstrations.

Figure 1: Bearing *shamoji* with their campaign slogans, women wearing sashes indicating Shufuren membership lead a demonstration against a rise in utility prices, on 19 February 1980, at the Kasumigaseki Building, site of Japan's cabinet-level bureaucracies (photo by *Yomiuri Shimbun*)

Three decades later, Chūpiren activists chose to distinguish themselves as advocates of reproductive rights not only by their forcefulness – a trait they shared with other 1970s radical "second-wave" feminists who were, as will be discussed below, strong opponents of Chūpiren's stance on the birth control pill – but also by their decision to wear pink helmets.[2] Chūpiren members also saw value in various forms of provocative sensationalism, such as publicly outing men who had extra-marital affairs or who brutalised their wives or partners. No other radical feminist group wore such readily identifiable clothing. Only the radical (and often misogynist) men of the New Left of the 1960s and early 1970s, from whom many of Japan's 1970s feminists distanced themselves to form their own groups, wore helmets as "part of their uniform" (Steinhoff 2014: 17). The media at that time mocked Chūpiren's helmets and attention-grabbing tactics, and in the process disparaged

2 The "second wave" metaphor has been challenged in recent decades (Molony / Nelson 2017: 2–3). The metaphor has become problematic because it universalised a movement trajectory from the history of white European and American women, overlooking the varieties of experiences of women of colour in those areas and of women in other regions of the world; and because it suggested, incorrectly, troughs of inactivity between mountainous waves of activism. However, in the Japanese case, "second wave" may have some explanatory value. The feminist movements in Japan in the 1970s were vastly different in orientation from earlier movements. A movement like Shufuren, with deep prewar antecedents, was reformist but never intended to overturn the political or social order. The 1970s movements did challenge both those orders. What makes this metaphor so striking is that the new radical organisations existed contemporaneously with the less radical ones such as Shufuren. The older and newer groups never competed for members, but they have competed for historians' attention. For another critique of the wave theory of feminist movements, see Shigematsu 2018: 218.

contemporary feminism as a whole in the eyes of those already inclined to view feminism through a negative lens.[3]

Members of both organisations distinguished themselves by the accessories they carried or wore in public protests – Shufuren's rice paddle and Chūpiren's helmet. While Shufuren stressed women's social, political and civic power through symbols identified with power *within* the family, and Chūpiren stressed women's power as individuals through their autonomy and independence *from* the family, they both distinguished themselves from other feminist groups in their use of symbolic accessories.

## The semiotics of accessories

Perhaps even more than dress as a whole, accessories lend themselves to symbolising identity, status, political resistance and/or the quest for affiliation (of which national identity and group membership are prime examples). In crafting societies and nations, individuals and groups use fashion – namely all forms of dress, including items carried in one's hands or worn on the head – as symbols or signs that can be read and understood by members of the group and others. In their introduction to *Fashion, Identity, and Power in Modern East Asia*, Kyunghee Pyun and Aida Yuen Wong write: "Modern fashion in East Asia is closely connected with identity and nationality" (Pyun / Wong 2019: 15), and a contributor to that volume, Mei Mei Rado, underscores the particular role of accessories as "potent cultural markers" (Rado 2019: 194). The semiotics of fashion and dress, writ large, and linking fashion to legible political, cultural, and social status as well as religious membership, can be made more focused by considering accessories. That is, the use of accessories is a more intentional way to articulate a message of advocacy than the somewhat more passive act of wearing clothing, as accessories can be easily put on, carried or removed. If they contain written messages of advocacy for a political goal, as do the rice paddles of the Shufuren, accessories function clearly as signs.

Several scholarly works that examine the semiotics of headwear worn by advocates in different types of (often disruptive) movements help us understand the rationale for Chūpiren's wearing of helmets that are both protective and provocative. Jean Gelman Taylor describes a hybrid (traditional and modern, Indonesian and Western) men's dress in her study of men's and women's dress in post-independence Indonesia. Accompanying his Western-style suit, President

3 As we shall discuss later, radical feminists of the *ūman ribu* ("women's lib") movement of the 1970s opposed both the operational methods and ideology of Chūpiren and of its founder Enoki Misako. Press accounts mocked their sensationalistic style. Interestingly, some feminists outside Japan were also critical of Chūpiren at that time, noting the "inordinate media attention paid to this sensationalist group" that overshadowed other feminist groups (Mackie 2003: 166–167).

Sukarno wore a fez-like hat called a *peci*, a sartorial hybridity he intended to signify the "pluralism and religious tolerance" of the new Indonesia he was trying to create (Taylor 2007: 108). While Sukarno was part of the state and not part of a resistance movement against the state when he wore his hybrid dress (though he had been an independence fighter during the Dutch colonial days), several other movements used headwear as a sign of resistance. Headwear could also be an intentional disruptive signifier. For example, during the height of India's Civil Disturbance movement (1930–32), pro-independence men were pressed by their fellow independence fighters to wear a "Gandhi cap", which the British colonial officials had prohibited, claiming they were a "symbol of sympathy with civil disobedience [and] a potential cause of disturbance to public tranquility" (Tarlo 1991: 140).

Another symbol of resistance, the Palestinian *keffiyeh*, "traditionally a Middle Eastern peasant headdress" (Tynan 2019: 125), was transformed into a nationalist symbol during the resistance to the British during the 1930s Arab revolts. In 1938, to hide rebels who could be identified by their head covering, "the rebel leadership commanded all Arabs in urban areas to also wear the *keffiyeh*" (Tynan 2019: 126). Peasants and urban men – and later women rebels, too – were united through this headwear, which, like the Chūpiren's helmet 40 years later, came to be seen as a marker of resistance (Tynan 2019: 127).

More recently, American women in Los Angeles devised a knitted pink cap with cat ears, the "pussy hat", that spread to tens of millions of women around the world protesting the 2016 election of United States President Donald Trump (Mehta 2017). Ubiquitous at women's demonstrations for over a year, they began to fade away in 2018, but their role as a sign of resistance had been powerful (Shamus 2018). Shufuren women bearing rice paddles and Chūpiren women in helmets understood the power of symbolism in accessories equally well, as will be shown in the course of this article.

## Shufuren – Rice paddles and citizenship

### The making of the prewar housewife consumer advocate

The Shufuren movement was born in October 1948 following a long gestation period. Its founding mother, Oku Mumeo, had engaged with a variety of approaches to feminism for three decades – as a proponent of women's political rights, a pioneering advocate of viewing consumers as citizens, a historian of feminism and a postwar member of the Diet (parliament) – before throwing herself into her unique form of feminism grounded in the consumer-citizen. The family matriarch's rice paddle was an ideal symbol for this kind of work,

because it represented empowered womanhood linked to the community's well-being and livelihood (*seikatsu*) rather than any notion of consumption perceived as self-focused.[4]

The early years of Shufuren and its rice-paddle-bearing founder can be comprehended through Oku Mumeo's pre-World War II activities. After graduating from Japan Women's University in 1916, this daughter of the middle class got a job under an assumed name in a textile mill – from which she was expelled within ten days for lying about her identity. In 1919 leading feminists Hiratsuka Raichō (1886–1971) and Ichikawa Fusae (1893–1981) recruited her to join them in founding the Shin Fujin Kyōkai (New Women's Association, NWA), which focused on expanding women's rights to participate in political activities and to allow women to terminate marriages or engagements to men with syphilis (Ichikawa 1974: 51, 66–70). Although NWA members lobbied members of the Diet, they initially failed to persuade the more conservative House of Peers that women should have *sanseiken* (the right of political participation) (Ichikawa 1974: 70–73, Loftus 2004: 49–58).[5]

Hiratsuka and Ichikawa left the NWA in 1921, but Oku soldiered on. She succeeded in getting the Diet to approve partial revision of a law repressing women's rights in 1922 when, in a one-on-one meeting, she impressed upon the staunchest opponent of women's rights, Baron Fujimura Yoshirō, that women could be involved in politics and still be "women" (Loftus 2004: 53.) Oku had strapped her baby on her back, as a good Japanese mother, and headed off to the meeting. This is an early example of Oku's manipulation, for political purposes, of one of the tropes of womanhood – motherhood – and her use of motherhood's powerful symbol of the baby on one's back. Here we see her developing two components of what would be her postwar activism in Shufuren: engaging in civic activism through non-threatening sources of female empowerment such as motherhood and, three decades later, the empowered housewife; and using easily understood symbols to highlight those sources of power – in 1922, her visible maternity, and after 1948, the Shufuren rice paddle.

While working on this political campaign, Oku Mumeo engaged in a debate in 1920 in the pages of a mass circulation journal with socialist feminist Yamakawa Kikue. Yamakawa asserted in an article that the NWA's piecemeal advocacy of rights would never improve women's conditions – only the destruction of capitalism could accomplish that. Oku's rebuttal to Yamakawa called on women across the political spectrum to join hands to raise women's consciousness. She summarised this view in her 1988 autobiography, asserting

4 Several excellent works deal with the expansion of the concept of the consumer (*shōhisha*) from its original narrow sense of being the end-user of products created using other people's work, a socially divisive concept, to being a part of the interactive social relationship of producers and users forging a more balanced society as *seikatsusha* (people promoting an improved lifestyle) (Maclachlan 1998: 113–128; Maclachlan 2001).

5 This and other references to Loftus 2004 are from Loftus's translation of Oku Mumeo's 1988 autobiography.

that no single theory could take the place of social justice activism grounded in real life, a view that undergirded the postwar Shufuren (Oku Mumeo in Loftus 2004: 54).

Oku turned to other activities in the following years. She established in 1923 a new organisation for a broad spectrum of working women angry at workplace and societal inequality, Shokugyō Fujinsha (Working Women's Association), with an associated journal, *Shokugyō fujin* (*Working Women*; Loftus 2004: 60–62). The magazine shifted its focus to working-class women, changing its name to *Fujin to rōdō* (*Women and Labour*) in 1923, and in 1925 to *Fujin undō* (*The Women's Movement*), with an expanded target audience of working-class, agricultural and white-collar workers (teachers, office workers, nurses, typists) as well as students and housewives. In 1926, Oku was invited to help run an emerging consumer organisation, the Nakano Consumer Union Movement. As she noted in her autobiography:

> In November of 1927, the women in the (consumer) union movement founded a new "association of households" (*kateikai*). […] I felt that housewives were the primary actors in the whole consumption process, and that the consumer union movement should be led by mothers and housewives. (Oku Mumeo in Loftus 2004: 67)

Over the next few years, Oku Mumeo put the idea of this type of association into practice with the Fujin Shōhikumiai Kyōkai (Women's Consumer Cooperative Society). By 1930, cooperative societies had expanded throughout the country and held a national conference. The issues they covered went beyond cooperative purchases; they addressed birth control, a mother-child assistance law, abolishing the sales tax and other social and economic issues. As we shall see with the postwar housewives' movement, the activities of this prewar movement underscored the notion that housewives were not only the primary managers and maintainers of their individual households – that is, the bearers in theory and practice of the *shamoji* – but also capable of exercising civic responsibility in matters of community and national significance (Loftus 2004: 68).

Working-class and poor men had been granted the vote in 1925 – wealth qualifications had previously determined suffrage eligibility – and the first national election in which almost all men were allowed to vote took place in 1928. Proletarian parties sprang up quickly, and just as quickly, they began to contend with one another. Oku countered the seeming political confusion by calling on women-in-need to support one another through cooperatives, settlement houses[6] and other support groups. To Marxist men around 1930 who criticised

6 Settlement houses originated in England in the 1870s but had their greatest impact and growth in the United States beginning in the 1880s. By the early 20th century, more than 500 settlement houses were built throughout the country. Educated young women, many inspired by Christian socialism or Jewish reformism, lived in these houses located in poor working-class communities. They taught their immigrant or minority communities English and other subjects necessary to break out of poverty. They offered daycare, food and charity. Social justice advocates from around the world, like Oku, sought to replicate settlement houses for the poor in their own countries.

these palliative actions as reactionary because they would "postpone the arrival of the revolution," Oku replied:

> To the fighters of the vanguard, just to have the revolution is enough. Love, children, the consumer economy, the cooperativization of life – these are merely unimportant details. However, for the ordinary proletarian housewife who lives in poverty, the main problems, the ones that press upon them every day, come from their children and from the household economy. […] To put roots down in the midst of their everyday life, and to cut out a path to social revolution – this is our job! (Loftus 2004: 72–73)

Here was the bedrock of the housewives' movement of the postwar era, grounded in pragmatism, feminine strength and empathy toward the poor. This would lead to a kind of collective citizenry of consumers, producers and other stakeholders, expanding to additional causes beyond the alleviation of poverty. And, of course, it was led by housewives represented by the *shamoji* rice paddle.

The last major programme of the pre-World War II period was the establishment of settlement houses, where all women, including the poor, contributed whatever they could – their talent, their labour, their money, their time. The Hatarakufujin no Ie (Working Women's Houses) were intended to help women who had to work longer hours by the end of the 1930s as men went to war. As Narita Ryūichi, a scholar of gender and labour in the twentieth century, has noted:

> Oku Mumeo's activities under the wartime system [consumer organisations, settlement houses] supported and contributed to that system, sought official recognition, and were directed towards modernisation of the working class and especially the home environment of working women. (Narita 1998: 151–152)

## The postwar movement of housewives bearing *shamoji*

As a member of the House of Councillors of the Japanese Diet – women were eligible for elected office and voted for the first time in 1946 – Oku Mumeo was pressed by her destitute constituents in 1948 to do something about the scarcity and cost of food and other necessities. The ideology and approaches to action she had developed since 1920 made the establishment of the Shufurengōkai, soon shortened to Shufuren, and its rice-paddle symbol associated with housewives, obvious. Oku's organisation was not the first housewives' association in postwar Japan. That was the Osaka Shufu no Kai (Osaka housewives association), a local organisation that arose following a protest in October 1945 by fifteen housewives demanding adequate rice rations. Carrying *furoshiki* (large cloth squares used to carry packages or other items, in this case rice rations), the Osaka housewives descended on a local rationing authority at noon, where they saw the officials eating generous portions of cooked rice. As Patricia Maclachlan recounts in her description of this scene, "miraculously" the housewives received their rations later that day. Consumers throughout Japan followed their Osaka sisters in what was later called the "Give us back our rice *furoshiki*

movement" (*Kome yokose furoshiki undo;* Maclachlan 2002: 62–63), a political action literally defined by an accessory. The Osaka Shufu no Kai that grew from this protest encouraged other women in the Kansai region[7] to found local housewives' groups, which came together as the Kansai Shufuren in 1949. Like the national Shufuren founded in Tokyo in the fall of 1948, the Kansai organisation initially focused on fighting black marketeering, excessive prices and critical shortages of and systemic distribution inequities in food and necessary supplies.

Inspired by the Kansai groups' activism, large protests demanding rice erupted in Tokyo – one with 15,000 housewives in August 1948 and another with 500 in September (Loftus 2013: 5).[8] House of Councillors member Oku Mumeo, motivated by her constituents' pleas for help, sprang into action and organised a housewives' protest rally against defective matches on 3 September 1948. Electricity had not been restored in many places since the end of the war, and cooking and lighting were done with coal and kerosene. This required matches. Available matches were remarkably shoddy and overpriced. Oku and her colleagues gathered a truckload of matches, a scene well covered by the media at the time. Shufuren would soon discover that the power of the image of trustworthy housewives acting in their familiar and respected capacity was often greater than the power of the law. Shufuren may have failed to win many of their lawsuits against producers of shoddy and unhealthy products – a tactic they employed later – but their power to shame companies or government officials could not be denied (Machlachlan 2014: 129–134). The wise housewife trope – later enhanced in observers' eyes by the *shamoji* rice paddle – often won the day. Indeed, in September 1948, Oku extracted an apology from the match manufacturers and an agreement by the government to regulate production (Maclachlan 2002: 64). She and her fellow protestors took the energy of their successful protest and founded the Nihon Shufurengōkai a few weeks later.

Although the immediate motive for the founding of the Shufuren was to overcome hunger and deprivation, the group also represented the coming to fruition of the goal of prewar and wartime consumer activists: to transform housewives into citizen-consumers. Oku's prewar and wartime promotion of the settlement movement, for instance, had a history of working with the government, having been co-opted from above by the wartime government. Frustrated at the lack of control in this wartime top-down collaboration, however, the postwar Shufuren sought to return to Oku's 1920s ideal of the citizen-consumer who exercised power in a gendered collaboration with other house-

7 Kansai is the south-central region of Japan, with cities like Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe.

8 This and other references to Loftus 2013 are from the memoirs of activist and historian Yoshitake Teruko, translated by Loftus.

wives. As the lead article in the inaugural issue (5 December 1948) of *Shufuren dayori*[9] (*Shufuren News*), the official organ of the Shufuren, announced:

> The greatest success of the Federated Housewives' movement to date has been the establishment of a pipeline into government officialdom so that the voice of female consumers can be heard in quarters that heretofore had been reserved for business elites only. […] This deeply rooted movement is aimed at responding to our rights being trampled upon. […] The Federation of Housewives is a cooperative organization formed for the purpose of uniting women around issues directly connected to our daily lives. (Loftus 2013: 52)

Exactly when Shufuren began to use the *shamoji* as a meaning-bearing symbol is uncertain. Shufuren's 2021 English-language website does not discuss the use of the rice paddle, although it does contain a small cartoon image of a young man running with a *shamoji* in his hand. Interestingly, the "About Us" page on the Japanese website does discuss the *shamoji* (Shufuren 2021: Japanese-language "About Us" page). In a section entitled "Oshamoji no kokoro" (The Heart of the Rice Paddle), we learn that the first sighting of the rice paddle in a demonstration was in September 1951, indicating that it may have taken three years to develop this symbol as the group's representation. To be sure, it may have been used earlier, but the "Heart of the Rice Paddle" paragraph does not suggest that. The last line appears to be written in the first person, stating that "I" or "we" took large mock-ups of *shamoji*, wrote upon them slogans representing the cause being protested, walked into the street and confronted the government.[10]

In addition to demonstrating while carrying rice paddles, some Shufuren members worked in research laboratories. In 1950, Oku hired a recently retired professor of pharmacy, Takada Yuri, as Shufuren's first product quality tester. In the next few years, Takada's work angered both food producers and government regulatory agencies because it found impurities and shoddy quality in numerous food products. Takada's success prompted a major laboratory upgrade in the new Shufuren building in 1956 (Robins-Mowry 1983: 197). Some government agencies saw value in Shufuren's testing and gave financial support to the lab (Buckley 1994: 159). Meanwhile, Takada's lab gave consumer advocates the data they needed to make evidence-driven arguments to push for and win passage of legislation to improve quality standards for food and other products. In 1968, after two decades of testing and monitoring products and carrying *shamoji* that pressured government regulators for their lack of action and shamed producers for selling unhealthful and mislabelled products, housewife activists from several organisations played the dominant role in the passage of the Shōhisha hogo kihonhō (Basic Law on Consumer Protection; see

9 Also Romanized as *tayori*.

10 Japanese does not use verb conjugations that indicate person or number; I inferred the first person from the context.

Shufuren 2021: English-language website). Although the law used the term *shōhisha* (consumer) rather than *seikatsusha* (person promoting an improved lifestyle – the term preferred by most activists), the passage of this law was an important step forward. Shufuren was joined by other members of Shōdanren, a federation of housewives' organisations and consumer cooperatives promoted by Shufuren in 1956.[11] The efficacy of the law is debated, however. Maclachlan notes that despite these kinds of laws, consumer protection continued to be more effective at the local or regional level than at the national level, and I-Liang Wahn argues that the law had just one major benefit for consumer activists, though noting that this was a considerable benefit. That is, it gave positions on the *shingikai* (an official advisory and deliberative council for consumer issues) to Shufuren and other Shōdanren members (Maclachlan 1998: 122, Wahn 2019: 86). From that perch, the Shufuren and other consumer groups pushed for and achieved numerous additional pieces of protective legislation in the following decades. Finally, perhaps, the "pipeline into government officialdom" heralded in the December 1948 *Shufuren dayori* would be created.[12]

On its own or, more often, in collaboration with other consumer groups, Shufuren mounted challenges to illegal price-setting, mislabelling of food products, environmental pollution, rises in utility rates (see protest in Figure 1), consumption taxes and numerous other consumer-related issues. Housewife groups have also been at the centre of issues that are as much political as they are consumer-related, including anti-nuclear movements (Higuchi 2008: 341–343), chemical safety movements, opposition to the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) and policies concerning consumer aspects of information-technology (Shufuren 2021: English-language website). The joint effort in 1970–71 to boycott colour televisions due to unfair price fixing was a success. This brought together over 15 million members of the so-called "big five" women's groups – Shufuren, Chifuren, the League of Women Voters, the Japanese Consumers Association and the Japanese Consumer Cooperatives Union (Robins-Mowry 1983: 202–203).[13] These kinds of issues bring us to the emphasis on *seikatsusha* activism and another reason to carry the *shamoji*.

11 The federation has gained a significant voice in recent decades, as the membership of its federated groups is over 30 million today; about one in four Japanese has some connection to a consumer group or co-op affiliated with the umbrella organisation.

12 There are about 200 deliberative councils reporting to various government ministries in Japan.

13 Like Shufuren, Chifuren (Zen Nihon Chiiki Fujinkai Rengōkai, National Federation of Regional Women's Organisations, founded in 1952) brought housewives together to address problems in postwar society and families. The two organisations often collaborated, but Shufuren was less tied to the Japanese government than Chifuren, which operated the regional Women's Halls, for example. Both were headed by feminist former colleagues of prewar suffragist Ichikawa Fusae: Oku Mumeo in the New Women's Association and Chifuren's Yamataka Shigeri in the Fusen Kakutoku Dōmei (Women's Suffrage League). The postwar League of Women Voters was a direct descendent of the prewar Women's Suffrage League, both headed by Ichikawa. Small wonder that these three organisations, whose leaders had known each for decades, played a central role in joint consumer activities.

Maclachlan's discussion of *seikatsusha* is compelling. There is no exact equivalent for the term in English. I have tried to render it in a short form as "person promoting an improved lifestyle" (the words "improve" and "promote" are not part of the term in Japanese, however, and *seikatsu* can mean "lifestyle, livelihood, life or living" in the sense of earning a living). Maclachlan's detailed analysis of the concept is spot-on. Citing a Shufuren vice-president in 1994, Maclachlan notes that the concept of a *seikatsusha* embraces a number of characteristics:

> [A] *seikatsusha* is a human being concerned with his or her life and physical and mental health. On a more sophisticated level, the concept embraces the notion of citizenship within both the nation and civil society (*shimin shakai*). […] A *seikatsusha* may sometimes assume the work-related functions of either a producer or laborer. […] Put simply, the concept of *seikatsusha* denotes a multi-faceted and proactive human being situated at the confluence of the social, economic, and political spheres. […] Whereas the term *shōhisha* [consumer] conjures up an image of conflict between producers and consumers, the notion of *seikatsusha* helps bridge the conceptual divide between the two and lays the foundation for a much more complementary – if not always harmonious – relationship between them. (Maclachlan 1998: 115–116)

In short, a *seikatsusha* promotes the good life for herself and those around her in the family, the community and the nation, and accomplishes this by exerting the respected authority of the "good wife" of the Japanese trope of "good wife, wise mother".[14] This enhances her civic belonging or citizenship and is manifested by the symbolic accessory of the housewife's *shamoji*. As Maclachlan notes, the *seikatsusha* does not, as a rule, build walls between labourers, producers and consumers. A housewife may be a worker or married to a worker, and the intersection of those two roles means production and consumption are not alienated in the case of the middle- and working-class housewife. If we subdivide the types of producers into big businesses and small businesses or farms, we can see that even producers per se are not necessarily the opponents of consumers either. Strong statements like Oku Mumeo's exclamation at the first National Consumer Rally in 1957 that "Capitalism is a double-edged sword! We are exploited both as workers and consumers!" (Maclachlan 2001: 58), were superseded by statements that supported small businesses. Consumers had to pull together with small producers and put big businesses in their place. Oku did not view business itself as the enemy, though the government's typical preferential treatment of big business frequently stifled consumers, workers and small producers, all of whom could promote *seikatsusha* well-being and civic involvement.

The numerous times Shufuren and other consumer groups pressured businesses and their ostensible government regulators – also by marching with *shamoji* – to lower prices, to clean up the environment, to produce healthy

14 In the prewar period, "good wife, wise motherism" was part of the school curriculum for girls, and the trope had tenacious staying power after the war (Uno 1993: 293–322).

products or to eschew forms of corruption such as mislabelling or price-fixing, should not be overlooked. And yet some scholars find it surprising that women in consumer groups failed to rally around the larger consuming public by opposing formal and informal trade restrictions on imported foods. If tariff policy kept out cheaper imported rice that could help the pocketbook of consumers, why didn't housewives take to the streets with *shamoji* to force the government to allow in more imported rice? The emphasis on *seikatsusha* over *shōhisha* (consumers) helps to explain that seeming paradox.

Shufuren women acting as *seikatsusha* to promote the well-being of other *seikatsusha* were, in fact, acting out the respected and empathetic role of the senior *shamoji*-wielding housewife in the historic family. This was not evident, however, to several commentators in the 1980s and 1990s who focused more on the issue of the price of rice for Japan's urban majority than on Shufuren's larger, overarching goal of improving the quality of life for all *seikatsusha*, including small farmers. These leading scholars included, among others, Karl van Wolferen, Thomas Flannigan and Amanda Andrews, Steven K. Vogel and Hamada Koichi. Flannigan and Andrews cited van Wolferen's suggestion that housewives themselves were uninformed as a way of explaining their lack of desire to prioritise cheaper imported rice over serving the larger community, including producers. "Finding themselves with increasing leisure," van Wolferen wrote, "they have developed an enthusiasm for neighborhood causes [that is, *seikatsu* or lifestyle causes]" (van Wolferen 1989: 52–53). They were co-opted by the government, Flannigan and Andrews contended, and "opposed opening the Japanese market to foreign rice and organized noisy demonstrations in favor of the [import] ban" (Flanagan / Andrews 1998: 27–29). Vogel correctly asserted that consumer groups focused on lifestyle issues, especially at the local level, but added that "many of them lacked a solid financial foundation to support their political activities" in favour of supporting restrictions on imported rice (Vogel 1999: 188). Hamada notes:

> Japan's consumers either willingly, reluctantly, or out of ignorance [...] endure the extremely high prices of rice and other agricultural commodities. [...] These [consumer] organizations consist mostly of women. The central organization, "Shufuren," [...] is often symbolized by a "rice scoop". (Hamada 1996: 9)

Those comments were written almost a quarter century ago, so they may simply represent an earlier viewpoint, one that I shared at that time as well.[15] By contrast, Helen Macnaughtan has more recently contended – very insightfully – that the Japanese view of activist housewives differed greatly from that of observers in the West like those noted above.

> Japan's Shufuren has played a leading role in the post-war consumer movement [...] demonstrating the importance of a gender perspective in bringing the Japanese govern-

15 The Japanese media similarly used stereotypical tropes and branded women students in New Left movements of the 1960s as "naïve" (Schieder 2021: chapter 1 passim).

> ment and producers to task over consumer issues. [… They] were increasingly viewed as knowledgeable and responsible consumers, aware of environmental issues, strong players in the development of consumers' rights, and in themselves an active, identifiable consumer group in the domestic market. (Macnaughtan 2012: 96)

Operating in a Japanese context, playing, as it were, to a Japanese audience, it comes as no surprise that the *shamoji* would be the important and readily understood symbol at the intersection of the traditionally empowered housewife and the postwar *seikatsusha* citizen. The Shufuren members were neither uninformed government toadies nor advocates of revolution. And the rice paddle was no trivial symbol.

## Chūpiren and attention-grabbing pink helmets

The women of the short-lived organisation Chūpiren, to whom we now turn, were mocked not only by conservatives but also by other radical feminists in Japan, and their signature accessory, a pink helmet, was always the subject of commentary in media accounts of their actions. Compared to other "second wave" feminist groups of the mid-1970s, Chūpiren has received far fewer pages in histories of the period. What was most important about the organisation was its linkage of reproductive rights to women's bodily autonomy; to social, political and economic rights; and to sexuality rights. In linking these types of rights, the group had some similarities and some dissimilarities with other radical feminists, but all demanded thoroughgoing societal transformation. The most notable feminist organisations of the 1970s were part of *ūman ribu* ("Women's Lib", also simply called *ribu*). While Chūpiren and other *ribu* groups shared the goal of feminist transformation, their ideologies and praxis differed in key areas. Where they did not differ was in their attitudes toward mainstream Japanese gendered society and women's movements like Shufuren. As Setsu Shigematsu notes, "Ribu's relationship to mainstream Japanese women's movements was highly critical, involving a deliberate distance and break from the existing constellation of political organizations such as housewife associations, women's democratic leagues, and mothers' peace movements" (Shigematsu 2012: 3).[16]

Many feminists in *ribu* groups of the 1970s got their start in New Left organisations of the 1960s and, as in many other countries, the hyper-masculinity and violence that characterised these earlier groups drove many women members, who were expected to abide by sexist gender roles, away from those groups and into women-only feminist groups. Chelsea Schieder, whose study *Coed Revolution* focuses on women activists in the masculinised New Left movements that preceded second-wave feminism, successfully resurrects the women erased by most historians and by those fleeing the New Left. Scholars' focus on the "Left-to-Lib" narrative of the development of feminist groups in the

16 For more on mothers as reformers, see Maxson 2018: 34–49.

1970s (Schieder 2021: 162) – which, Schieder notes, derives from participants' memories of sex-role stereotyping, sexual violence to keep women in line, other kinds of sometimes deadly violence and the marginalisation of women who mentioned sexual violence (Schieder 2021: 93–100, 108) – is part of that erasure. It is unsurprising that many former members recalled the New Left of the 1960s as having been toxic, which has contributed to the discounting of the contributions of the small number of women in that movement.

Many of the largely but not exclusively male members in New Left groups wore helmets of various colours, so there is a precedent for some helmet-wearing by a small number of women activists.[17] Chūpiren's wearing of helmets adopted the legacy of militancy of their predecessors in New Left movements – without the violence. Other than Chūpiren members, however – and a company of 200 helmet-wearing women marching as a group on Antiwar Day in October 1970, which some scholars consider the beginning of the second wave of feminism in Japan (Schieder 2021: 152) – most feminists of the 1970s did not dress or wear accessories as a uniform to set them apart from other feminists. Chūpiren members, however, wore a "revolutionary ensemble, which consisted of pink helmets, and sometimes sunglasses and towels over the mouth" (Norgren 2001: 116). Norgren notes that Chūpiren members were "notorious" as much for donning "revolutionary clothes" as for their "militancy" (Norgren 2001: 116), paralleling the type of intentionality of markers of resistance such as the wearing of hats or scarves in Indian, Palestinian and American resistance movements, as described above. Chūpiren's eye-catching dress, Norgren notes from conversations and interviews, was what many Japanese recalled decades later. Shigematsu reminds us that their distinctive headwear gave Chūpiren their nickname, "Pink Helmets" (Shigematsu 2012: 225–226).[18]

Like Shufuren, Chūpiren had a founder, Enoki Misako, whose ideas and personality were at the centre of the organisation. Just as there are few historical studies on Chūpiren, Enoki herself remains fairly obscure in history. The name "Enoki" is a pseudonym (her real name is Katayama), and this article will use the name she chose to use. Enoki was a member of a *ribu* writing group, the Urufu Kai ("Wolf Group"), which translated English-language essays and also published original work (Mackie 2003: 152). When the Wolf Group refused to allow Enoki to use their group's name on her pamphlet "Lift the Pill Ban!" at the 1972 Women's Liberation Convention, because they opposed hormonal contraception, she left and formed Chūpiren (Norgren 2001: 116). Enoki was a pharmacist by profession, so she was knowledgeable about the pill (Chujo / Aizawa 2021: 136), but rather than being an asset, her profession was likely

17 What all sources call "helmets" were not military helmets but rather plastic hard hats of the kind worn by workers at construction sites. The New Left students wore helmets of various colors designating group affiliation. For an image of a large mass of demonstrators in multi-colored helmets, see Ogura 2015: 13.

18 While most sources refer to Chūpiren's helmets as pink, one contemporaneous observer noted that the "Pink Helmet brigade [… wore] pink and blue helmets and wav[ed] pink flags" (Robins-Mowry 1983: 135).

Figure 2: Helmet-wearing Chūpiren members staging a sit-down at the Ministry of Health and Welfare in protest of the proposed revision of the Eugenic Protection Law, 12 May 1973 (photo by *Yomiuri Shimbun*).

one of the reasons she came to be shunned by other feminists who opposed the pharmaceutical companies that they identified with Enoki (Norgren 2001: 116). The most notable detailed account of Enoki and Chūpiren was written by scholar-activist-journalist Akiyama Yōko, who had been Enoki's colleague in the Wolf Group and later became an opponent of Chūpiren, its demeanour and its ideology (Akiyama 1993: 121–138). Founder of the influential Femintern Press (Mackie 2005: 152), Akiyama was not alone in voicing opposition to Chūpiren. Unsurprisingly, Akiyama paints Enoki and the organisation in a negative light, reflective of the rivalry between Chūpiren and Gurūpu Tatakau Onna (Fighting Women Group), the organisation that had founded the Ribu Shinjuku Sentā (Shinjuku Lib Centre) that one movement veteran calls the "core of the [1970s] movement" (Matsui 1990: 438). The groups' major ideological differences on the issues of abortion and the contraceptive pill will be discussed below.

Different operating styles also contributed to the groups' antagonism. For example, most radical feminist organisations communicated with one another through *mini-komi* (mini-communications) and newsletters and eschewed enlisting the mass media. By contrast, Chūpiren preferred using the mass media (Norgren 2001: 66), which maximised their media exposure.

The ideas and actions of the Shinjuku Lib Centre's Tanaka Mitsu, the best-known *ribu* feminist of the 1970s, were, like those of Chūpiren, shockingly radical in many people's eyes. At the first major women's liberation conference in the summer of 1971, for example, all the participants were naked. The media ridiculed Tanaka and her group. Not wishing to be further ridiculed, other "second-wave" radical women's groups also distanced themselves from Chūpiren because "its splashy (*hade na*), publicity-seeking protest activities attracted a great deal of media attention (and ridicule), leading the general public to believe

that Chūpiren was representative of the larger *ribu* movement".[19] Nevertheless, for the many "housewives, students, and office workers" who wrote to Chūpiren requesting contraceptive information, Chūpiren was representative of the movement in a more positive sense (Norgren 2001: 115–116). Thus, the organisation, enhanced by its ability to play the media, attracted support from some average women (outside the feminist movement), even as it was attacked in the press and rejected by other feminist groups whom the media also treated as frivolous and laughable. For Chūpiren, the medium was a major part of the message.

The mainstream radical *ribu* activists did not develop a more positive attitude toward Chūpiren in the decade following the demise of both Chūpiren and the Shinjuku Lib Centre. Akiyama Yōko's early 1990s reportage was typical of other feminists and the mainstream news media (Akiyama 1993: 121–138). Feminist Matsui Machiko's 1990 article in *NWSA Journal*, "Evolution of the Feminist Movement in Japan", which introduced Japanese feminist movements to many readers in English, bemoaned Tanaka Mitsu's being "ridiculed and trivialized by male critics and journalists" for her radical ideas and actions (Matsui 1990: 435), but Matsui never mentioned Chūpiren at all. This was undoubtedly an intentional erasure due to the continuation, long after both groups folded, of memories of ideological differences and fears of negative press.

Some would-be allies in the movement to secure approval of the contraceptive pill, such as the mainstream Family Planning Federation of Japan, were also wary of the effect of Chūpiren on their own advocacy of the pill. The Federation's executive director Ashino Yuriko described in 1999 how two decades earlier, Chūpiren members, wearing pink helmets, crashed a meeting of the National Convention on Family Planning and had to be ejected. Ashino contended that Chūpiren's sensationalism extended the wait for the pill to be approved and "distorted [the] perception of women's liberation" (Ashino 1999: 86–88). However, the lengthy approval process may also have been the result of bureaucratic foot-dragging as well as concerns about possibly diminished use of condoms during the AIDS crisis if oral contraceptives were approved (Weisman 1992: Section A 3), rather than resulting principally from the government's reaction to Chūpiren.

The clash of ideas between the Shinjuku Lib activists and Chūpiren over representation can be linked to deep ideological differences concerning gender and reproductive rights advocacy. Abortion was available in Japan before the development of the contraceptive pill, so we shall start there. The Eugenic Protection Law of 1948 (EPL; the law's name was changed in 1996 to "Maternal Protection Law") outlawed abortion. A revision of the EPL in 1949 allowed

19 Eto Mikiko asserts that "the emergence of [Chūpiren] discouraged many women from sympathizing with feminism" (Eto 2008: 124).

an exception to the prohibition for "economic reasons", and 99 per cent of abortions from 1952 to the early 2000s were approved under the exception clause (Kano 2016: 77). By the 1970s, debates over oral contraceptives and abortion became intertwined. Just as pro-pill and anti-pill feminists were challenging one another, a right-wing religious organisation with representation in the Diet, Seichō no Ie, was making one of their periodic proposals to revise the EPL by removing the economic exception for abortion because Japan was no longer poor. Other interested parties proposed replacing that exception with one allowing abortions for foetal abnormalities, discoverable through the new diagnostic technologies of the 1970s.

Disability rights groups immediately opposed any revision of the EPL. Their opposition was joined by the Shinjuku Lib and Chūpiren groups, but the opposition of these two groups was grounded in different principles. The arguments made by the disability rights community resonated deeply with many social reformers. Tanaka was concerned that she might be seen as opposing disabled people's right to life. She carefully threaded the needle by stating the *ribu* position as one where abortion would have to remain legally possible at least until all families who wished to have babies could afford to have them. She asserted: "Make a society where we can have children, where we want to have children," thereby undercutting Seichō no Ie's contention that Japan's wealth made abortion for economic reasons immoral (Norgren 2001: 68).

Tanaka's argument was based on an economic justice framework more than on women's bodily rights. Another source of difference was in regard to the question of contraceptives. The *ribu* feminists, principally Tanaka, had strongly opposed the legalisation of oral contraceptives for the purpose of birth control – the pill was at that time available off-label if prescribed for dysmenorrhea. Nonetheless, they were concerned that it would become more widely available, which they did not support, if it could be prescribed for birth control. *Ribu* feminists feared the pill's possible side effects, and they wished to make men share responsibility for birth control by using condoms. In addition, *ribu* feminists were concerned that it would be easier for lawmakers to remove the economic exception from the EPL if the pill were widely used (Norgren 2001: 114).

Ironically, one reason why the Ministry of Health and Welfare dragged its feet on approval of the pill was that they contended the converse, that is, that abortion made the pill unnecessary. *Ribu*'s Tanaka believed that abortion was a mother's violent murder of her foetus, but, paradoxically, she justified it on economic grounds.[20] Tanaka's colleagues in the Fighting Women's Group opposed the pill for additional reasons. Some were hostile toward science and technology because of Japan's horrific industrial pollution at that time, and this extended to medical technology like the pill (Eto 2008: 123).

20 Tanaka also supported mothers who killed their living children, under vastly different circumstances, so her philosophy was complicated, to say the least, and beyond the scope of this article (Shigematsu 2012: 24).

Chūpiren's Enoki, on the other hand, argued from the perspective of women's absolute rights as opposed to the maternalist point of view of *ribu* activists. A woman had the right to her bodily integrity, Enoki stressed, and that meant she should have the "basic right" to use oral contraceptives and obtain abortions. As a pharmacist she stated that the pill was safe, although it was hard to persuade most *ribu* feminists of that (Norgren 2001: 117). The foetal disability issue, Enoki contended, was not related to a woman's right to determine what was best for her own body and health, and a choice to have an abortion should be possible irrespective of the question of disability. Women should not be shamed for making choices that Enoki noted were probably emotionally painful; the men of the right-wing Seichō no Ie hoped to shame women for these choices (Kano 2016: 99). In the end, neither side had to deal with the disability issue, as the EPL was not revised while the Shinjuku Lib Centre and Chūpiren were still active. But their major differences in approaches to women's rights and women's economic rights did produce tensions.

The groups' different perspectives on how to deal with women's issues help to explain why only Chūpiren members distinguished themselves from other 1970s *ribu* feminists in wearing symbolic attire, especially the helmet. In contrast, the Fighting Women Group's resistance to technology and support for the environment led them to "internalize ecological concerns rooted in traditional motherhood worship in Japan" (Eto 2008: 123). In their support for the environment, they may have seemed to have more in common with Shufuren, but as we have seen, the Fighting Women, like Chūpiren, rejected mainstream women's groups and sought to radically change society (Shigematsu 2012: 3).

But their means differed. The Fighting Women ran summer camp meetings in the countryside without specific leadership, where everyone was encouraged to speak (and possibly not wear clothing), and later established the Shinjuku Lib Centre, where participants could take part in consciousness-raising as a way to help change individuals and especially society (Eto 2008: 124). This approach did not produce a group of women dedicated to specific feminist attacks on policy – especially surrounding abortion and the pill – or to outing misbehaving men. While both groups sought societal change, the policy-oriented Chūpiren stressed individual rights, using the helmet of the militant fighter to publicly highlight each member's commitment to specific goals. The Fighting Women, their name notwithstanding, used quieter, collaborative consciousness-raising tactics.

The helmeted Chūpiren members existed for the same five years as the Shinjuku Lib Centre – from 1972 to 1977. Across the Pacific, North American newspapers in cities large and small proclaimed that feminism in Japan was dead when Chūpiren folded, although that was far from true. The *Ottawa Journal* asserted in an article published on 29 July 1977 that "Japanese Libbers

Fold" (Mehta 1977), and thousands of miles to the west, the *San Bernardino County Sun* rang a death knell for Japanese feminism, proclaiming on 24 July that the "women's movement folds in Japan" (Shamus 1977). Erring more egregiously was the *New York Times* on 23 July, claiming that with "support waning, [the] women's movement knuckles under in Japan" (Malcolm 1977: 32).

These journals and others were happy to discuss Chūpiren's helmets, but they all failed to observe that there was a multifaceted and long-standing women's movement in Japan both before and during the years of Chūpiren's existence. What had folded was Enoki's ephemeral political career, not women's continuing quest for equality in all facets of life. The *Times* quoted Enoki saying that her failure meant "the cause of women's liberation in Japan is finished" (Malcolm 1977: 32), then followed up by claiming, incorrectly, that the "women's liberation movement here is expected to virtually disappear for the foreseeable future". Only Chūpiren, they noted, with its highly visible "military style uniforms with pink helmets" (Malcolm 1977: 32), could raise women's consciousnesses.

But Chūpiren had already been losing members who were tired of Enoki's top-down organisational style since 1974, three years before it disbanded. In 1977, Enoki decided to run for a seat in the Diet as a member of the Japan Woman's Party, which she created that year to launch her campaign. Failing to be elected, she repaid her husband, as promised, for his loan to her campaign. He took the repayment in the form of Enoki doing weekly housework, which the North American press considered emblematic of the end of Japanese feminism. There was a silver lining in what appeared to be this terrible case of a fall from leading a reproductive rights movement to performing menial housework – Enoki's implicit payment was an acknowledgement of the feminist demand that housework be compensated (White 2002: 222, note 34).

None of the North American papers mentioned any organisations other than the flamboyant Chūpiren. To be sure, the symbolic helmets elevated their visibility, but other organisations existed as well. The closing of the Shinjuku Lib Centre in 1977 was followed by many of its leaders moving into significant roles in other spheres, including politics, publishing, academia and other women's organisations. Academic Women's Studies programmes also emerged in Japan. Some former activists, such as the Ribu Centre's Tanaka, moved far from the limelight, as had Enoki, but many more transitioned to these other forms of feminist activities.

## Conclusion

Shufuren and Chūpiren, the former still active, the latter disbanding in 1977, were diametric opposites in character, behaviour, operational tactics and most other aspects. The former sought to improve the lives of citizen consumers, the latter sought to overturn sexism in Japan by asserting women's individual reproductive and social rights, an effort which distinguished them not only from the Shufuren but also from other radical feminists of the 1970s. But what they had in common was an understanding of how to use the media for gendered resistance, using accessories in a way that told their historical stories and attempted to generate support – even if, in the case of Chūpiren, such support was short-lived.

Both organisations understood that their accessories would be the first thing, other than their gender, that observers would notice when Chūpiren or Shufuren marched or occupied a public or private space. Shufuren's *shamoji* made the protesting housewives (*shufu*) acceptable, as they appeared to be remaining in their proper lanes. But the words on their rice paddles were strong and disruptive of the status quo, somewhat challenging the housewifely stereotype while supporting the trope of the powerful wielder of the rice paddle – that is, the controller of the family's resources. Chūpiren members, with their militant dress, especially their pink helmets, were intentionally noticeable, loud and, ultimately, the members believed, disruptive. Chūpiren failed to achieve the group's primary goals in the 1970s, but many of their goals have been legally adopted, in whole or in part, since their period of activism.

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# Sunday Cinderellas
## Dress and the Self-Transformation of Filipina Domestic Workers in Singapore, 1990s–2017

Mina Roces

## Abstract

Singaporean female employers subject their Filipina domestic workers to strict rules governing their dress and behaviour, in the name of de-sexualising them and maintaining their status as invisible servants at the employers' beck and call. This paper suggests that the fashionable attire that Filipina domestic workers don for their day off is also a symbol of rebellion and a rejection of their employers' desires to render them plain and unattractive. In this sense, fashion is more than just a coping strategy: it is a way of expressing a sexual self, a beautiful and feminine self that is not allowed to be exhibited during workdays. Although these fashion makeovers only last less than 24 hours, in their leisure time Filipina domestic workers transgress the weekday restrictions of their employers while marking their own personal self-transformation as ultra-modern, independent women with consumer power and cosmopolitan tastes.

**Keywords:** Singapore, Philippines, migration, domestic workers, cultural capital, beauty contests, dress, self-transformation

I spent July and August of 2017 working on an ethnographic mapping of the stores in Lucky Plaza mall in Singapore as part of a research project investigating the impact of Filipino migrant consumer power (Roces 2021b). What surprised me was that while most Singaporean store owners were not disturbed by a woman walking around observing their outlets and writing things down in a notepad, the Filipino retail owners were anxious about my presence. Even though I introduced myself as a Filipina scholar, Filipinos did not believe me until I spoke in Tagalog. When I asked why, their explanation had nothing to do with my skin colour (my father is Spanish Filipino) or my almond eyes (my mother is Chinese Filipino). Instead, the judgement of my race was based on my sartorial style. Both Filipino and Chinese Singaporean store owners (who assumed I was Singaporean Chinese and spoke to me in Mandarin) told me:

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> You do not dress like a Filipina. Filipinas dress fashionably and sexy. Singaporeans dress simply and elegantly. We thought you were from the Ministry of Manpower checking up on us. (field notes, Lucky Plaza, 17 July 2017)

After I recovered from the realisation that I was no longer fashionable (or sexy), this comment clarified why none of the Singaporean owners complained about my presence. They thought I was from the Singaporean bureaucracy. It also alerted me to the perception that the Filipinas who visit Lucky Plaza mall – and by this I refer to the literally thousands of Filipina domestic workers who spend their Sunday day off there – have the reputation of being not just fashionable but also "sexy". Since Singaporean female employers forbid their "house maids" to wear clothes that sexualise them, and because hegemonic cultural constructions of the Filipina deny her sexuality (as most Filipinos think women are incapable of sexual desire) (Roces 2012, Estrada-Claudio 2002: 20), this comment provoked me to think about how Filipina domestic workers in Singapore rebel against their employers' attempts to keep them from expressing their femininity, and to analyse the way they use beauty makeovers and fashion to express their new identities as cosmopolitan women.

There is a critical mass of scholarship on the topic of Filipino overseas domestic workers that focuses mostly on their working lives and/or activism or resistance in advocating for improved wages, working conditions or the right to a day off.[1] There has been pioneering work also from the point of view of the Philippine state, which is represented by scholars as a "labour brokerage state" that transforms Filipinos into "migrants for export", to quote the title of Robyn Rodriguez' book (Guevarra 2010, Rodriguez 2010).

More recently Beatriz Lorente's major study on the way the state and maid agencies or transnational labour brokers promote the image of Filipina domestic workers as a hardworking, skilled and docile labour force presents us with a convincing account of how a labour-sending state and maid employment agencies have attempted to mould Filipina domestic workers to perform "the scripts of servitude" (Lorente 2017: 3). The activities of Filipina domestic workers on their Sundays off in Hong Kong, particularly the ubiquitous beauty contest, have been featured in a documentary and discussed by anthropologist Ju-chen Chen (Villarama 2016, Chen 2015). The documentary, aptly entitled "Sunday Beauty Queen", and Ju-Chen's work suggest that these contests and performances by domestic workers are not just about status for the winners and participants, but are also about creating a community of friendship and support overseas (Villarama 2016, Chen 2015). While Anna Guevarra and Beatriz Lorente briefly refer to the dress requirements associated with the ideal "supermaid" touted by labour brokers, there is to date no detailed study that concentrates on Filipina migrant domestic worker dress practices from the post-1970s migration wave.

1 Cf. Parreñas 2003, Lan 2006, Constable 1997, Lindio-McGovern 2012, Leibelt 2011, Zontini 2010.

This article therefore sets out to analyse the dress practices of Filipina domestic workers in Singapore on their day off, from the perspective of a dress and gender historian. I take a semiotics of dress perspective, in which dress is considered a form of "text" and therefore can have several meanings attributed to it, often meanings different from the wearer's agenda. The wearer may imbue a particular attire with meaning, but the public that views the ensemble of clothing and accoutrements interprets "the text" from their own ideological positions. For example, Emma Tarlo showed how Mahatma Gandhi wore a loincloth made of white *khadi* – coarse, homespun cloth – to send the message that India's poverty could be solved by handspinning and freedom from British rule (Tarlo 1996). But for the Indian people the loincloth contained another message, too: that he was a holy man, a saint, an ascetic (ibid.: 78). Dress is therefore also intrinsic to an individual's public and visual performance of ethnic, class and gender identities. In addition, as the example of Gandhi illustrates, dress is also one way to display resistance and can become intrinsic to strategies for empowerment by a marginalised group.

I take my theoretical inspiration from the historical scholarship on the zoot suit and pachuca/o identity in the 1940s USA.[2] Historians of the zoot suit have analysed the way dandiacal dress was used as a strategy for rejecting working class identities.[3] The zoot suit was bright in colour with exaggerated shoulders, an extra-long jacket, and pleated slacks that billowed from the waist but were tight at the ankle (Howard 2010: 113). African Americans and Mexican Americans quickly popularised this fashion style and created a whole new subculture associated with it that included a new unique pachuca/o slang called *caló* that was incomprehensible to outsiders (Macías 2008: 84). The politicisation of the zoot suit and its connections with ethnicity – epitomised by its link with the identity of the pachuco/a – fashioned a distinctly Mexican American subculture and celebrated the dignity of the wearer's ethnicity amidst racial, economic and social discrimination (Macías 2008, Escobedo 2013: 2, Alvarez 2008: 115–16). Mexicans who wore the zoot suit, set off by a ducktail hairdo and a gold watch and chain, were called pachucos/as, and were associated with radicalised youth who rejected traditional Mexican values as well as the mainstream United States conceptions of race, sexuality and labour (Alvarez 2008: 116, Escobedo 2013, Kelley 1994).

Like the patrons of the zoot suit, Filipina domestic workers in Singapore since about the 1990s have found dignity, confidence, femininity and sexuality through fashionable dress, refusing – to quote from Alvarez – "to allow wage labour to be the primary signifier of their working-class identity" (Alvarez 2008: 98).

2 Pachuca/o identity refers to the fashioning of the new subculture that was neither Mexican or American but was Mexican American. Wearing a zoot suit was a visual message that proclaimed this new identity.

3 Cf. Alvarez 2008, Kelley 1994, Macías 2008, Escobedo 2013, Ramírez 2009, Howard 2010, Alfrod 2004, White 1998.

I argue that fashion here is used by a marginal class /ethnic group – Filipina domestic workers – on their day off not just to resist the host country's attempts to mould them into invisible, unfeminine and dowdy servants, but also as an important rite of passage in their migration project of self-transformation into middle-class cosmopolitan subjects. My time frame (from the 1990s to 2017) coincides with the increase of Filipino stores at Lucky Plaza, the tenure of the "She's My Girl" Beauty contest (from 2001–2017) and the timing of my research visit.

Sources for this article include archival work, interviews and ethnographic methods of study. I was in Singapore for a week in July 2011, and for three weeks in July–August 2017. During that time, I visited Lucky Plaza every day for three weeks to do a mapping of the stores that catered to Filipino domestic workers there (Roces 2021b). Lucky Plaza mall sits in the heart of Singapore's affluent shopping district, surrounded by high-end couture malls with international brand names such as Cartier, Miu Miu, Balenciaga, Prada and Hermes, as well as upmarket malls like Paragon and Tangs. The presence of a thriving shopping mall that primarily catered to Filipina domestic workers has been described as "out of place" or an anomaly (Juan 2005: 93). The sheer number of Filipino stores indicates that it caters to this lower-class temporary migrant group. On weekdays, the mall is very quiet, and you will be able to spot some locals from the dominant middle-class shopping there, but on Sundays it is crowded with almost solely Filipino clientele (Roces 2021b).

Interviews were conducted with owners of Lucky Plaza shops such as the Belisse Beauty Salon, the Maganda-Sexy Beauty Salon, the Cez Services Official photography store, Filipino courier stores such as LBC and A Freight, the owner of Filipino-owned food outlet Barrio Fiesta, and three Filipino domestic workers who volunteered for the Humanitarian Organization for Migrant Economics (HOME), a non-governmental organisation that provides assistance to migrant workers in Singapore. Furthermore, I interviewed Filipino domestic workers who frequented Lucky Plaza, the two publishers of the *OFW [Overseas Filipino Worker] Pinoy Star Magazine*, the manager of the Philippine National Bank and workers at the real estate company Camilla Homes. I participated at one graduation ceremony for Filipino domestic workers who took courses from HOME and took part in a financial literacy seminar for Filipino migrants in Singapore in July 2017 and another in Malolos, Bulacan province, Philippines in March 2019 (for the families left behind). All interviewees were given pseudonyms. This paper builds on memoirs written by Filipino domestic workers in Singapore, as well as on my own intense research on Filipino migration (Roces 2021a). Another rich source was the *OFW Pinoy Star Magazine* (published between 2001 until 2017), a magazine directed at a Filipino domestic worker readership and the sponsor of the "She's My Girl" beauty contests.

Photographs of the beauty contestants also comprise an important archival source. The theoretical perspective on the semiotics of dress regards official photographs or posed photographs taken at a studio and "selfies", because they are destined for a public audience, as staged events. As staged events, they are excellent sites for analysing self-representations for public consumption. The corpus of photographs that Filipino domestic workers present as beauty contestants to promote said contests, posted on Facebook, comprise the migrants' own curated performance of the narrative of success in the host country. They are carefully staged to avoid references to their working life (I have not encountered photographs of them doing domestic chores or child-caring duties in their Facebook posts of personal scrapbooks).[4] The photographs are silent about the working lives and experiences of abuse, discrimination or loneliness, and even about the impact of migration on the marriage, children and family life of the smiling subjects. But these carefully choreographed snapshots are a rich source for analysing the self-representation of Filipino domestic workers, revealing how they fashion themselves into confident, cosmopolitan, fashion-savvy and sexy subjects.

This is where the interviews and the memoirs become important, because it is here that Filipino domestic workers are candid about the work situation and the impact of long distances on their personal lives. In the middle of my three-hour interview with Melita for example, her adult son, who was already in his forties, continued to text her asking for money. It was then that she confided to me that her adult children and grandchildren constantly demand money from her so that she has not been able to save much for her retirement. It was only after she attended financial literacy seminars run by the Atikha Overseas Workers and Communities Initiative that she learned how to say no (and indeed in the seminar I attended in Singapore in 2017 there was an entire module on "How to say no to family requests for financial assistance") (interview with Melita, Lucky Plaza, 15 July 2017). Hence, while the women I discuss here have empowered themselves as consumers of fashion and beauty products, thus rejecting the cultural ideal of self-sacrificing mothers, many of them faithfully send remittances home to support their families.

## Filipina domestic workers in Singapore

At the time of research there were about 70,000 Filipino domestic workers in Singapore (as of June 2014; Wessels 2015: 10). In Singapore about one in five households employs or is dependent on overseas foreign workers for housekeeping and care for the young and elderly (Wessels 2015: 10).[5] The total number

4 See also Margold on photographs sent home by Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong (Margold 2004).

5 Lin / Sun 2010: 183 suggest the estimate is 1 in 6 households.

of all foreign domestic workers in Singapore was 218,300 in 2010 (or 16 per cent of the total foreign workforce) with Filipinos comprising more than a third of this niche group. Domestic workers earned an average monthly salary of SGD515 in 2015 (Wessels 2015: 27). My own interviews with Filipina domestic workers in 2017 reveal a slightly higher average wage of about SGD600, with the highest paid person (working for a foreign embassy) receiving SGD2000 a month.

Almost 30 per cent of people living in Singapore (in 2015) are "non-residents". But this is not a homogenous group (Amrith 2017: 35). A hierarchy of three visa categories exists: 1) those with an Employment Pass, who are eligible for permanent residency (for professionals such as doctors and bankers), 2) those with an S-Pass, who are mid-level skilled staff and are also eligible for permanent residence, and finally 3) those classified as performing unskilled or semi-skilled work (such as domestic work and construction), who are granted a work permit but are not eligible for permanent residency (ibid.: 37).

Domestic workers belong to the third category. By law, they cannot be accompanied by dependents and are forbidden to marry Singaporean citizens or permanent residents (ibid.). Their work permit is governed by strict rules that ensure that they remain a transient work force: they receive short-term contracts up to a maximum of two years, there are the restrictions on marriage alluded to above, and they are forbidden to give birth to children in Singapore (which is enforced through regular pregnancy tests; ibid.). Migrant domestic workers are also excluded from the Employment Act, which regulates working hours, access to leave and general work conditions, and can be repatriated at will by their employers (Koh et al. 2017: 93). A study commissioned by HOME reveals that foreign domestic workers experienced "structurally hostile work conditions" that included long working hours (13–19 hours a day), a lack of rest days, inadequate sleeping accommodation, food deprivation and psychological abuse (Wessels 2015).

Since most domestic workers live with their employers, they are also subject to a gamut of rules that govern their dress, deportment, behaviour and communication with the world outside the house (through rules about using the mobile phone, for example). Scholars have labelled these constraints on mobility, living status and social activities as a "total institution" (Lin / Sun 2010: 183–184). Since they encounter constant and daily surveillance in the private sphere, domestic workers feel that they can only express themselves in the public sphere on their days off, when they can be free from the prying and judging eyes of their employers (Amrith 2017: 143, Yeoh / Huang 1998: 585). But their presence in public places is not welcome either.

The common perception of locals is that their "maids" (the word used by locals to refer to their domestic workers) are only temporary workers and therefore have "no part to play in public life and therefore no place in the public arena belonging to the citizenry" (Yeoh / Huang 1998: 588). Employers

experience the anxiety that, away from their watchful eyes, their domestic workers might find boyfriends, get pregnant and have to be repatriated – which means that the employer would lose the security bond of SGD5000 paid to the Singaporean government (Yeoh / Huang 1998: 583–602). Thus, it was only in 2013 that a law was passed giving domestic workers one day off per week. The law itself remains unenforceable and employers are allowed to have an opt-out compensation-in-lieu of the day off paid to their staff (Koh et al. 2017: 197). At the time of writing in autumn 2021, NGOs such as HOME are still advocating for a true 24-hour day off since many employers interpret the day off as an 8-hour day requiring their domestic workers to complete their chores before 9 a.m. and expecting them to return home before 7 p.m. to cook dinner.[6] Nevertheless, since the implementation of the day-off policy, surveys have shown an increasing access to days off – from 12 per cent of domestic workers given a day off in 2011 to 41 per cent in 2015 (Koh et al. 2017: 191).

Singapore's civil society is considered a "closed" system, meaning that it is difficult for domestic workers (perceived to be outsiders) to lobby for migrant rights (Koh et al. 2017: 89). Thus, it is usually NGOs such as HOME and Transient Workers Count Two who advocate on their behalf (ibid.: 89–104). Taking the "day off" campaign as a case study is illuminating in this regard. In an excellent article on the topic, scholars Chiu Yee Koh, Kellynn Week, Charmian Goh and Brenda S.A. Yeoh explain that the reason why the aims of the campaign were achieved was because of the "vernacularization" of the claims discourse, which deliberately framed the need for a day off not in terms of rights, but in terms of maintaining Singapore's competitive edge in attracting the migrant workers needed for economic development, and by focusing on the benefits the day off can have on the maid's productivity for the employers (which included using the day off to learn new skills such as cooking and sewing, courses offered by NGOs such as HOME; Koh et al. 2017: 89–104). This political situation underscores the marginal status of foreign domestic workers who depend on NGOs to advocate on their behalf and/or as a refuge when they become victims of abuse, including emotional abuse and non-payment of salaries. The NGOs themselves are acutely aware that a rights discourse approach to their legal advocacy would not be popular in the Singaporean political and cultural environment.

## The rules of dress

In the movie "Remittance" – an independent feature film about Filipino domestic workers in Singapore based on true stories – there is a scene where the

6 See Jolovan Wham, HOME consultant, speech at the graduate exercises for HOME, Singapore, 23 July 2017.

white male employer undresses and changes clothes in his bedroom, leaving the door open. As he goes about his private everyday habit, the Filipina maid enters the room, tidies up and then leaves. During the entire time she is in the same room with him, her presence is not acknowledged. It is as if she was not there at all (Daly / Fendeleman 2015). This scene captures very well the way these women are expected to be there, but not there – they are needed to perform the everyday tasks that maintain the household while remaining quietly and unobtrusively in the background. During their working days they are expected to be obedient, silent and modestly dressed.

Another scene in that same film shows a woman submit tearfully to having her long, beautiful locks cut short because her female employer demanded it (Daly / Fendelman 2015). The emotional moment captures the trauma experienced by the domestic worker at being compelled to surrender her femininity and beauty. The rules of dress are aimed not only at ensuring that a maid remains invisible, but are there also to downplay if not erase the symbols of her femininity and sexuality. Labour brokers that include the Philippine government and maid agencies instruct applicants on dress, deportment, behaviour and speech – what Beatriz Lorente has labelled the "scripts of servitude" – traits considered desirable by employers and necessary (according to the Philippine government) for protecting the domestic worker from unwanted attention and possible sexual harassment (Lorente 2017).

Although Lorente focuses on the use of language, primarily English, in the promotion of Filipinos as "supermaids" and quality workers, she also briefly describes how these labour brokers alter the physical appearances of these workers to assure employers that they are "professional, and modest women". When applicants turn up for official photographs or videos of themselves that will be sent to prospective employers, they are asked to cut their hair short or wear it swept away from their face in a ponytail, and to refrain from wearing make-up, jewellery or painted fingernails because "domestic workers are not supposed to present themselves as sexually attractive women" (Lorente 2017: 81–87).

Anna Guevarra's analysis of the training video produced by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration for Taiwan-bound domestic workers produces a list of what domestic workers must not do that includes not wearing perfume, tight fitting jeans or "transparent clothes" in the presence of their employers (Guevara 2010: 82). This advice from the government side is presented as a way of self-protection, as the session on "be friendly, not familiar" warns them not to appear sexually available to male employers and trains them to be assertive if they experience inappropriate behaviour towards them (Guevarra 2010: 82–83). According to Guevarra, labour brokers believe that physical appearance is an important quality particularly "because of wives' fears about their husbands getting seduced by [the domestic worker]" (Guevarra 2003: 367, quoted in Lorente 2017: 83). Hence, the dress code is to ensure that "they are

de-sexualised, they perform gendered labor as workers and servants and not as women" (Lorente 2017: 81).

Domestic workers are prohibited from wearing revealing clothing such as sleeveless blouses, spaghetti straps, plunging necklines or short skirts. They must not wear make-up, jewellery, nail-polish or high heels. Pei-Chia Lan notes similar rules imposed on Filipino domestic workers by Taiwanese employers, noting that "female employers would raise their eyebrows if workers wore V-collar shirts, skirts, or mini-shorts" (Lan 2006: 7) because "the 'simple and covered' rule aims to suppress the femininity of workers and reinforce their class subordination" (ibid.: 167). Breaking these dress codes and/or any hint of entertaining boyfriends at the employer's home may result in instant dismissal.

One memoir from Cherry, a domestic worker in Singapore, reveals the serious repercussions of breaking the rules. Cherry's female employer returned home early one morning and was surprised to see her domestic worker attired in "a sexy spaghetti top and tight shorts" handing food over to her Filipino boyfriend in the lobby of the apartment (Banados 2011: 80). The action provoked her angry boss to fire her on the spot. It was unclear from the memoir whether the employer's ire was because of Cherry's immodest attire or because she was entertaining a strange man, or even because she was handing out food from the employer's kitchen. This instant dismissal also surprised Cherry, who had been working there for three years and had been assured that her employer was satisfied with her work.

Yeoh and Huang have alerted us to the way "the off-day provides the maids with an opportunity to shed their dowdy 'workday uniforms'" and put on their best clothes:

> [...] dressing up on off-days in a manner contrary to what is deemed appropriate for domestic servants thus provides the opportunity for maids to use material markers not only to assert their identity as urbane women, but also to close the gap if not invert (albeit temporarily) the positions of "ma'am" and "maid". (Yeoh / Huang 1998: 597)

Writing about Filipino domestic workers in Taiwan, Pei-chan Lan makes a similar point that the domestic workers' weekend dress attire has the potential to blur the visual difference between "madam" (the term used by the domestic workers to refer to their female employer) and "maid", with domestic workers complimenting each other with the exclamation "Wow, you look like our madams!" (Lan 2006: 167–168). Since most Singaporean employers do not require their domestic workers to wear a uniform, the standard dress that has now come to be considered the visual representation of "foreign maid" is "a garb of over-sized T-shirts, long shorts or bermudas and a short and simple (almost tomboyish) hairstyle distinguishing the 'maid' as the sexual inferior 'other'" (Yeoh / Soco 2014: 177). The everyday attire of denim jeans and T-shirt has become so closely associated with the identity of "Filipino maid" that if a female who does not look Chinese is spotted in that attire, local Singaporeans

assume that she is a Filipino domestic worker (online interview with *OFW Pinoy Star* publisher and founder Luz Campos-Mesenas, 11 January 2021). According to scholar Megha Amrith, Filipino nurses want to distance themselves from Filipino domestic workers and underscore their identity as health professionals with careers on a par with the host country's citizens (Amrith 2017). They accomplish this distancing by avoiding Lucky Plaza mall, by dressing modestly and simply on their days off and by living quiet lives (Amrith 2017).

In this context, the day off has become important as the one day domestic workers can break free from the strict rules of dress they are required to observe during the long working days. However, the domestic workers sartorial transformation on Sundays is only tolerated if the employer does not witness it. Luisa, another one of Lan's informants, recalls that when she left the apartment on her day off wearing make-up, high heels, a silk blouse and dyed hair:

> My neighbors in the elevator saw me [and] smelled my perfume. And there were rumors in the whole building! They told my employer: "Luisa goes out, like a movie star!" My boss didn't believe it. So, the security guard rewound the videotape – they have a video camera in the elevator – and showed it to my employer. (Lan 2006: 229)

The fact that any sighting of a domestic worker breaking the dress code requires a police detective-style investigation complete with examination of video security tapes underscores the importance of dress in maintaining social hierarchies. Hence, Filipina domestic workers in Singapore can only wear what they like during their day off at Lucky Plaza away from the gaze of their employers. In fact, some of them leave home carrying a change of clothes, which they don once they arrive at the mall. The fact that this rejection of their working-class identity can only be performed outside their employer's gaze might suggest that this resistance is only subtle and ephemeral. However, photographs of these women in their best clothes, accessories, hair and cosmetics document for posterity these physical transformations. After all, the employers are not the audience for these self-representations. The fashionable dress and the photographs are primarily directed at their fellow Filipinos, whom they meet on their day off, including at Sunday mass, as well as the classmates and teachers of their short courses and their families in the homeland.

While the weekday dress of domestic workers is designed to make them invisible, their Sunday sartorial transformations place them on display at Lucky Plaza. Singapore locals avoid Lucky Plaza on Sundays because they feel like a minority there. As Shanti, a local put it: "The Filipino crowd alone is enough to scare me out of Lucky Plaza. I feel so much like an outsider in what is supposedly 'ours'" (Yen 1998/99: 57). Like the zoot suiters whose flamboyant presence reclaimed public spaces for their ethnic group in racially segregated America and declared that African Americans and Mexican Americans were "here to stay", Filipina domestic workers have claimed Lucky Plaza as "their

space", albeit only on Sundays (see Roces 2021b), defying the host nation's desire that they remain invisible and restricted to the private sphere of the home. In this sense, the large numbers of Filipina domestic workers – these "Sunday Cinderellas" – proclaim their group's visibility, with their loud voices (the cacophony of voices in the mall on Sunday is deafening) announcing their presence. With the "uniform" of jeans and t-shirt now replaced with fashionable clothing, these women call attention to themselves not as domestic workers but as women.

While the body of work on Filipino/a overseas workers has given us an excellent picture of the everyday lives of these women and of the impact of their migration on the families left behind, as well as on their own identities as mothers and as financial providers, my study shifts the analytical lens to the way they use fashion as resistance and as a rite of passage that marks their new identities. I argue that the women who join beauty contests are participating in the project of transforming themselves into fashionable, cosmopolitan women who reject not only their employers' rules of dress, but also their own working-class identities.

Brenda Yeoh and Maria Andrea Soco have used the term "working class cosmopolitanism" to distinguish this from elite cosmopolitanism, because "it is not so much based on the prior cultural or economic capital of the privileged, but rooted in a process of learning that takes place quite intensively in the course of migration as contact zones and cultural exchanges multiply" (Yeah / Soco 2014: 175). Yeah and Soco argue that the experience of living and working in Singapore has made domestic workers more "modern" as they embrace the consumption practices that prior to their migration they had associated only with the middle classes in the Philippines. In addition, the volunteer work and short courses, such as book-keeping, finance, entrepreneurship and computer courses, not only equip them with new skills, but also give them the opportunity to embrace leadership roles, as they might evolve from students to trainers in the various NGOs (Yeah / Soco 2014). My research builds on this scholarship by underscoring the link between these sartorial transformations and the women's new identities as working women (breadwinners) in an affluent country, who have become cosmopolitan subjects. This physical, cultural and personal transformation is marked when they return home looking like fashion models – sending the message that they are no longer *provincianas* (from the rural areas), as their new look marks them as sophisticated urban dwellers rather than locals of the rural village or town from which they hailed.

## Sunday Cinderellas: Fashioning a beautiful self

Many of the Filipino domestic workers in Singapore do not come from urban areas. Most of the women whose life stories can be found in the book of memoirs of Filipino domestic workers in Singapore, *Path to Remittances* (Banados 2011), and in the promotional biographies of beauty contestants for the "She's My Girl" beauty contest published in the *OFW Pinoy Star* come from the rural provinces, many of them from Iloilo in Central Philippines. Their deployment to Singapore is the first time they have lived overseas in an affluent country using technology such as washing machines, electric ovens, vacuum cleaners, dishwashers and other modern appliances. Many of them have never worn high heels or make-up, or coloured their hair before (online interview with Campos Mesenas, 11 January 2021). The long hours of domestic work in Singapore take a toll on their physical health and endurance. That they only have one day off a week also means they have little time to rest and revive from the tiring working week. Pampering themselves with beauty treatments is a logical way to restore energy, confidence and happiness (online interview with Campos Mesenas, 11 January 2021).

The process of "making oneself beautiful" (*pampaganda*) has become a rite of passage for many Filipino migrant workers. When I asked the Filipina owner of the Belisse Beauty Salon why there are so many beauty salons in Lucky Plaza, her response was that there are three things that were most important to all Filipinos: *pagkain* (Filipino food), *padala* (shipping of gifts/goods to the Philippines) and *pampaganda* (to make oneself beautiful). At Lucky Plaza in 2017 there were 23 beauty salons that clearly targeted a Filipina clientele, with The Iloilo Hair Salon running four franchises – probably a reflection of the fact that a lot of Filipina domestic workers hail from Iloilo. On Sundays, these salons are crowded with clients, almost all of them Filipinas. The owners of Belisse Beauty Sanctuary and the Maganda Sexy Beauty salon disclosed that 90 per cent of their clients are Filipinas (interviews Lucky Plaza, 17 and 27 July 2017). One of my interviewees, Portia, admits that she goes to the beauty parlour once a month and spends SGD35 for a pedicure, 50 for a foot spa, and 90 for hair dye and blow drying. The most popular treatment is "rebonding" or straightening of the hair; a procedure that costs SGD130. Considering that their salaries are SGD600 on average, this is a significant investment. Portia herself confided that the monthly beauty makeovers use up one-sixth of her salary (interview with Portia, Lucky Plaza, 21 July 2017).

Why would women spend one-sixth of their monthly salary on hair treatment? Cultural constructions of the feminine in the Philippines conflate beauty with women's virtue. The definition of *maganda* refers not just to physical beauty, but also to socially pleasing conduct. A woman who is "beautiful" extols the

virtues of her gender. While *maganda* is the adjective used to refer to socially accepted behaviour, its antonym *pangit* ("ugly") is used to connote what is evil or bad, or what is socially unacceptable behaviour (Roces 1998: 17, 168). Beauty queens in the Philippines are highly admired and many are approached to run for political office, capitalising on their cultural capital as virtuous women and translating it into power (Roces 1998: 168–178). This partially explains the huge popularity (some would say "obsession") with beauty contests in the Philippines and in the diaspora. Some of the Filipino beauty contests run in Singapore include the "She's My Girl" competition, which is run by *OFW Pinoy Star* magazine, the "Miss Fashionista" sponsored by one of the retail outlets in Lucky Plaza, Miss Filipinas Singapore and the OFW Supermodel contest (see *Pinoy Star* August / September 2016: 18, and March 2017: 11).

The "She's My Girl" beauty contest run by *OFW Pinoy Star* magazine is the brainchild of Luz Campos Mesenas, a Filipina married to a third-generation Filipino Singaporean. Since running the contest was her idea, she was responsible for organising the major event. Her involvement spanned from finding sponsors, to hiring/ bringing in a choreographer, a make-up artist, a professional photographer and a coach to give tips about answering questions in public, and even to scouting for contestants at Lucky Plaza. Given her role in the beauty contest and in publishing the photographs and biodata of these women in *OFW Pinoy Star* magazine for almost two decades, she knows a lot about how participation in beauty contests has changed the lives of the contestants.

The contest, which was first held in 2001, was conceived to promote the magazine and to give the Filipina domestic workers something to do and to look forward to on their day off. The first ten contestants in 2001 received lessons on make-up, deportment, beauty and fashion from a professional beauty consultant, a dance choreographer, a make-up artist and a professional catwalk model. In the promotional advertisement inviting contestants to participate in the "She's My Girl", "Mr. Pinoy Star" and "Singapore Filipino Idol" (a singing and talent show), candidates were promised that: "Contestants will be groomed by our beauty and catwalk experts to acquire beauty, confidence, intelligence, teamwork, positive attitude, great personality, talent" *(Pinoy Star* July/August 2014: 14–15). Rehearsals for the event lasted about 5 months, guaranteeing that whether they won or not, the contestants would emerge from the experience with the knowledge of how to present a better-groomed, catwalk-model image of themselves. These lessons in grooming are in direct contrast to the instructions and training given to them by labour brokers, designed by the Philippine government to make them model domestic workers. Participation in beauty contests is one way these women, many of whom hail from the rural provinces in the Philippines, learn how to wear fashionable cosmetics, trendy clothes and new ways of walking, talking and presenting more confident versions of themselves in front of an audience.


Figure 1: Contestants for the Pinoy Talent Festival 2017. Photos taken by and courtesy of *OFW Pinoy Star* magazine, March / June 2017, p. 11.

# BEACH BODIES



**KAREN DARROCA MAYON, 27**
FDW for 2.5 years in Singapore, from Tantangan, South Cotobato
**H** 158cm **W** 47kg
**VS** 34-24-34

**HER SECRETS TO...**
**a 24-inch waist:** Proper diet and exercising for five minutes every day.
**a firm butt:** I do squats in the morning before I start my work. Living in a three-storey house also helps as an exercise, you know, going up and down every day. It also helps shape my sexy legs.
**smooth skin:** Drinking lots of water daily really keeps my skin moisturised.

**HER STORY**
**My sacrifice...** "Pinakamahirap para sakin as an OFW is yung malayo sa pamilya, lalo na sa dalawa kung anak – Sapphiera Gwyn and Kylen Emerald."

**If I could...** "Gusto ko madala family ko dito even for just for a short vacation para ma-experience din nila ang ganda ng Singapore. Lalo na sa Gardens by the Bay, Botanical Gardens at sa zoo."

**When I go home...** "Gusto kong pagpatuloy yung negosyo ng pamilya namin. I grew up in a bakery shop. Iyon yung business na nagpa-aral at nagpakain sa aming magkakapatid kaya gusto kong ipagpatuloy yung negosyong nasimulan ng parents ko 19 years ago. Aside from that, gusto ko ring magtayo ng tailoring shop or salon."

**On my off day...** "Apart from meeting my friends, nagmimakeup ako for some models in their events or photo shoot."

**My OFW mantra...** "Huwag basta-basta susuko sa ano mang laban."

Photo: Edwin Wong, K.W.

**JOY CORTEZA, 30**
FDW for nine years, from Davao City

**HER STORY**
**On my day off, I...** "Attend Filipino events. I am also a volunteer catwalk trainer at AIMS International School."

**When I finally go home, I...** "want to have a pharmacy, para naman magamit ko yung pinagaralan ko noon as a pharmacist."

**But I can only go home when...** "Nakapundar na at pag nakatapos na sa pag-aaral yung bunso kong kapatid. She's taking criminology now, 3rd year college."

**My #1 inspiration as an OFW...** "My one and only son."

Photo: Allan Lansangan



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**HOW TO...**
## FEEL CONFIDENT IN A BIKINI

1 **Don't just stick to one style.** There's a wide variety of bikini types, and you may find one that you love and feel comfortable wearing just as you are. **DO THIS:** Try on a halter top or a bikini with tiny shorts instead of a typical bikini.

2 **Practice ahead of time.** If you're not used to being in a bikini, it can help to try it on a couple of times before you go out in public. **DO THIS:** While in your bikini, spend some time in front of the mirror, and force yourself to give yourself a compliment.

3 **Act confident.** Confidence is a sexy trait, so one of the easiest ways to get a sexy bikini body is to simply act confident. **DO THIS:** Stand up straight with your shoulders back. Don't slouch over. Lastly, put on your best, flashy smile.

4 **Swear off the haters.** Some people may tell you your body doesn't belong in a bikini, no matter what your size. It's not their place to tell you what you can and can't put on your body. **DO THIS:** *Dedma lang*, girl, or tell them, "Only I get to decide what I think looks good on my body, and I think I look amazing in this bikini. So go away, hater."

*Tips from http://www.wikihow.com*

Figure 2: "How to feel confident in a bikini." Page taken from and courtesy of *OFW Pinoy Star* magazine, March / June 2017, p. 18.

The 2017 list of contestants included Filipina domestic workers from the provinces of Iloilo, Maycauawayan Bulacan, the Mountain province, Batangas, La Union and Bangued Abra, most of them mothers with children left behind in the Philippines. When asked why she joined the contest, Julie Damong from the Mountain province wrote "to develop my skills, and boost my self-esteem and confidence" and Ellen Viernes from Batangas confided having a similar motive "to gain confidence, meet new friends and experience this once in lifetime opportunity to be part of this one-of-a-kind event that showcases Filipinos' beauty, talent and creativity" (*Pinoy Star* March/June 2017: 11). Leizheyll Pesino from Bicol confessed that:

> [...] joining a pageant was just a dream for me until one day, I saw the Pinoy Star ad online and emailed my application immediately. [...] I admit I don't have a beautiful face and a sexy body but I am still excited to join [...] coz I am excited to see myself in the limelight (ibid.: 10–11).

The published photographs of these contestants in the pages of the *OFW Pinoy Star* magazine display them – in full make-up, with newly coiffured, coloured or straightened hair and wearing skin-tight spaghetti strap blouses – looking confidently at the camera in the manner of fashion models in clearly studied poses (see Figure 1). The magazine encouraged readers to send their "most stylish pix, or most gorgeous and stylish photos" (*Pinoy Star* January/February 2017: 12 and August/September 2016: 22). And these photos were showcased, regularly accompanied by the subjects' beauty tips. Merly Emperador, a domestic worker who was the Dream Top Model 2016 from Naguilayan, Binmaley Pangasinan, sent photographs of herself in skimpy bikinis posing like a swimsuit model (*Pinoy Star* August/September 2016: 22) while Karen Darroca Mayon from Tantangan, South Cotobato and Joy Corteza from Davao City were featured in *OFW Pinoy Star* in a segment on "How to Feel Confident in a Bikini" (see Figure 2). A "Sunday Style" section of the magazine allows domestic workers the opportunity to dole out advice about fashion and style along with photographs of themselves (cf. *Pinoy Star*, August/September 2016: 20, 22). In these photos they are presented as true fashion influencers.

Janeth Alvarez Deza, 30 years old, from Cagayan Valley and mother to a 12-year old boy, confided: "I love to wear long sleeves but off-shoulder because it feels so sexy!" (*Pinoy Star* August/September 2016: 22). Two domestic workers, 27-year-old Jenny Correa from La Union province in the Philippines and 26-year-old Mary Rose Joy Sampiano, shared photos of themselves in skin-tight shorts, high heels and midriffs that exposed their navels and advised readers on how to achieve a "sexy butt" or look sexy. Jenny wrote: "Want to be sexy? Eat lots of fruits, exercise regularly and lastly stop drinking cold, carbonated drinks" (*Pinoy Star* February/March 2017: 14), while Mary Rose claimed "Dancing will give you a sexy butt, I swear" (ibid.). In a special feature on "Day Off Comfort", revealing how "these lovely ladies show us how

they dress for relaxation", the majority of the women in the photo montage were attired in short shorts or very short mini-skirts, which they identified as their preferred attire on their day off. For example, 31 year-old Mar Wenith de Asis from Iloilo and mother of one, confessed that her favourite outfit was "short shorts, or skirts that show off my shapely legs, with flat shoes or sandals" (*Pinoy Star* September/October 2016: 20). One feature entitled "Babes in Black" claimed that the women photographed were examples of how "You can be sexy and comfy at the same time". The photograph of Maria Dolores "Dolly" Pascual showed her in black body-hugging pants, full make-up, styled hair, red nail polish and black tank top with spaghetti straps and her midriff exposed. A 32-year old, who had been working as a domestic worker for 8 years in Singapore, she narrated her poignant personal story:

> For two years, I didn't get a day off. I was so homesick. […] I usually spent Sundays joining OFW [Overseas Filipino Worker] pageants with my friends. As of this writing, I'm competing at the biggest modelling pageant for OFW's here. I'm also happy to be part of the Dreamcatcher family, an NGO here. Before these, I went to Sunday School [Sunday classes], taking up basic hotel management. (*Pinoy Star* January/February 2017: 13)

As her statement reveals, Dolly coped with homesickness with several strategies that included joining beauty pageants, volunteering for an NGO and enrolling in short courses that might one day allow her to move away from domestic work. Hence, in these photographs and magazine features, these domestic workers are presented as role models for readers.

The only traces of their provincial background are the biographical notes that indicates their place of birth. The look that they aspire to communicate is that of "trendy, beautiful and sexy". The clothing they wear is not expensive and probably purchased in the flea market at Lucky Plaza (online interview with Campos Mesenas, 11 January 2021). But the price tag is not the point; it is the women's representation as beautiful role models that takes centre stage in these photographs.

The prizes of the "She's My Girl" beauty contests have been very lucrative – both in cash and in kind (SGD1500–2000 for the winner, SGD1500 for second place and SGD700 for third place). The winner also receives return tickets to the Philippines provided by Philippine Airlines. Sponsors included Singtel (the Singaporean telecommunications company), which has donated products including smart phones and phone cards, and also restaurants that donate vouchers, as well as companies that provide beauty products and food hampers (Campos Mesenas, 11 January 2021). Some of the winners use the prize money to start a new business in the Philippines, to build a house or donate to victims of natural disasters in the homeland: "I was able to invest in building a two-storey house in Ifugao and also, part of my winnings was donated to [Typhoon] Yolanda victims" (Sunshine Manuel, "She's My Girl" prize winner of 2013; *Pinoy Star* July/August 2014: 14).

Figure 3: The façade of the photo studio Cez Services at Lucky Plaza, Singapore, displaying a magazine cover with a Filipina beauty queen. Photo by Mina Roces, 2017.

But more importantly, much like beauty queens in the Philippines, the winners acquire social status from their beauty titles. Some of the beauty queens married foreigners or boyfriends, who encouraged them to move out of domestic work. For example, one former "She's My Girl" beauty queen married a British citizen and has moved with him to Qatar; another one now has a European boyfriend who is a manager in Singapore. Another former winner has a foreign boyfriend who helped her set up a business in the Philippines, while another followed her boyfriend to Vietnam (Campos Mesenas, 11 January 2021). But although as beauty contestants these domestic workers challenge their employers' rules of dress, one can argue that they also endorse hegemonic cultural constructions of the feminine (Roces 2022). In the Philippines it is usually only models, actresses and celebrities who appear in magazines, television and social media posing provocatively in photographs wearing revealing clothing. Ordinary women, particularly married women, are expected to be more modest. In the homeland, only single women participate in beauty contests. But most of the contestants for the many beauty contests run for Filipinas in Singapore are Filipina domestic workers who are wives and mothers. In this sense the contestants in Singapore send the message that married women can also express their sexual selves and wear swimsuits in a public arena.

Many domestic workers do not participate in beauty contests or go to Lucky Plaza on Sundays. For many religious and devout Catholics, attending Sunday mass is a major highlight of their week. One of my interviewees, Portia, loves to go to church on Sundays. But even this conservative activity inspires her to primp herself because: "I love Sunday also to go to church and have a reason to be beautiful. I want [it to be that] every time I go to church, I must be beautiful" (Portia, Lucky Plaza, 21 July 2017). Attending church requires more modest attire rather than "sexy" clothing, but even here, domestic workers can take pride in their appearance. Other women prefer to spend their day off volunteering with the many migrant NGOs or the Catholic Church, or they enrol in some of the courses to learn new skills such as caregiving, cooking or dress-

making run by the HOME Academy; some with the intention of changing careers or moving to a different job in another country. I was privileged to witness the fashion makeovers that graduates of these courses underwent in preparation for a graduation ceremony on my last Sunday at Lucky Plaza (30 July 2017). I complimented a group of ladies attired in long formal gowns who were clients at the many beauty parlours at Lucky Plaza. They told me that they were getting ready for their graduation from one of the NGO-run weekend courses that had updated their qualifications from "domestic workers" to "caregivers". They had treated themselves to hair straightening, hair extensions, perms, false eyelashes – the lot – and they all looked just as if they were going to step out onto a red-carpet event (see Figure 4). Their success was symbolised with new clothes and a new "beautiful" look. In other words, it was important to mark their achievement on graduation day also with a fashion makeover. These women were clearly celebrating their project of self-transformation and perhaps launching their first steps to move away from domestic work. When I participated as a speaker at a graduation ceremony at one of the HOME Academy courses, those who went up to the stage to claim their diplomas were also dressed formally (some in formal long gowns even though the event was in the morning); they were all wearing make-up and most had had their hair done professionally in a beauty salon.

Figure 4: A Filipina domestic worker in front of one of the beauty parlours at Lucky Plaza, Singapore, on her way to her graduation ceremony from a weekend course. Photo taken by Mina Roces, 2017.

There are a handful of professional photography studios at Lucky Plaza that provide services for passports and visas or employment papers. The majority of those who pose for formal studio portraits at Lucky Plaza are Filipinas.[7] Some of the photo portraits are 8½ by 12 inches or A4 size and formatted like a magazine cover. These magazine cover photos are sent to the Philippines as mementos to convey the subject's self-representation as a glamorous woman. In the shiny laminated photograph, a gorgeous "cover girl" with perfect coiffure and make-up smiles at the audience. According to Cez, who owns a photograph studio on the fourth floor, these portraits declare to friends and relatives in the homeland that the portrayed are "beautiful" (*maganda sila*) and that

7 In contrast to the more evenly ethnic division of requests for passport pictures (interview with the owner of Cez Services, Lucky Plaza, 19 July 2017).

they have made it abroad (interview with the owner of Cez Services, Lucky Plaza, 19 July 2017; see Figure 3). In so doing, they are tapping into the beauty/power nexus in the hegemonic cultural constructions of the feminine and send the message that the migration project was a success.

## Summary

Singaporean female employers subject their Filipina domestic workers to strict rules governing their dress and behaviour, in the name of de-sexualising them and maintaining their status as invisible servants at their employers' beck and call. I suggest that the sexy and fashionable attire that Filipina domestic workers don for their day off at Lucky Plaza is also a symbol of rebellion and a rejection of both the labour brokers' (the maid agencies and the Philippine government; Guevarra 2010, Lorente 2017) and their employers' desires to render them plain and unattractive. In this sense, fashion is more than just a coping strategy; it is a way of expressing a sexual self, a beautiful and feminine self that they are not allowed to exhibit at work. Although these fashion makeovers only last less than 24 hours, in their leisure time Filipina domestic workers transgress the weekday restrictions of their employers while marking their own personal self-transformation as ultra-modern, independent women with consumer power and cosmopolitan tastes. Many of the contestants of the beauty contests I analysed here hail from the countryside and, prior to their migration journey, did not got to beauty salons or wear make-up, nor did they dare to wear sexy fashionable clothes. Becoming a beauty contestant taught them how to wear fashionable and sexy attire and to apply cosmetics. They learned how to walk like runway models, to pose seductively and confidently at the camera, and how to speak in public. They became celebrities and cover girls with photographs of their new glamourous selves appearing in, for example, the *OFW Pinoy Star* Magazine and in Facebook posts. The transformation is not just physical – it mirrors their own journey from lower-class wife and mother to breadwinner, independent woman and influential consumer. The photographs also document their transformation from *provinciana* to sophisticated *fashionista* – thus proving that migration was not merely an economic project.

Filipino domestic workers become beauty queens and fashion gurus, handing out advice on diet, exercise, good grooming and fashion styles in the *OFW Pinoy Star* magazine. Clearly, this new role as arbiter of what is in vogue is evidence that they are no longer *provincianas*. Interviewees told me that an appointment with the beauty salon before they return to the Philippines for holidays ensures that the first impression they give when they return home is that they are now modern, cosmopolitan urban women. Some of those who are married

with children in the Philippines behave much like single, independent women while abroad – joining beauty contests, for example. The expenses and time involved in making themselves beautiful (*pampaganda*) also shows that they are rejecting the ideal of being self-sacrificing martyrs (also the hegemonic ideal for motherhood) (Roces 2012). In this sense, their Sunday sartorial style calls attention to the way they have empowered themselves.

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# Book Reviews

Lipi Begum / Rohit K. Dasgupta / Reina Lewis (eds): *Styling South Asian Youth Cultures. Fashion, Media and Society*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020. 248 pages, £29.99. ISBN 978-1-3501-5407-0 (pb)

This book is a much-needed addition to the shelves of anyone interested in South Asia, fashion and/or youth culture. A methodology that builds from ethnology and focuses on South Asia, rather than simply on India, is a welcome change, given how easily the smaller countries and cultures on the margins are excluded from such discussion. The editors, Lipi Begum, Rohit K. Dasgupta and Reina Lewis, all build on their robust background on dress scholarship in this volume. Part of the *Dress Cultures* series edited by Reina Lewis, the book brings essential contributions from various parts of South Asia and includes cosmopolitan cities, queer culture and "less well-documented" parts of eastern and southern India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, Sri Lanka and even the diaspora in the West (p. 2). Several high-profile contributors, such as Arti Sandhu, Teresa Kuldova and Reina Lewis, render this volume instantly noteworthy.

Although the volume covers the countries Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, the editors acknowledge that they were unable to include content from Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Maldives (p. 25). Yet what they do include is such an important addition to the conversation on fashion and youth culture that this gap is not an issue, and only builds anticipation for the future. A discussion on Bhutan, for example, and a focus on "intra-South Asian transmissions" brings readers to a better understanding of "local, national, international and transnational convergences" (p. 2), since, as the editors suggest, South Asia stands as at the unique intersection of traditionalism and neoliberalism. The editors have worked hard to weed out a homogenising lens on the study of South Asia. By anchoring the investigation on important South Asia-centric theoreticians such as Gayatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee and Gayatri Gopinath, they lay a strong critical and historical foundation for the region and its culture.

Arti Sandhu opens the book with the important question of street style and how it is different in the South Asian context, centring the discussion on comfort, convenience and consumption within personal expression. By highlighting the work of street style photographers, designers and brands, Sandhu illustrates how all are vying for cultural space in India's fashionscapes. As she points out, the orientalising gaze here is notable.

Discussing queer styling, Sunil Gupta and Charan Singh, as well as Lipi Begum, Rohit K. Dasgupta and Kautav Bakshi, offer important perspectives on visibility, invisibility and subversion in popular culture and film. The interview format

adopted by Lipi Begum and Rohit K. Dasgupta in asking questions of Raisa Kabir on the topic of South Asian LGBTQ youth in Britain and sharing knowledge through a primary evidence process is a welcome change. The discussion essay between Sunil Gupta and Charan Singh employs the same technique. Rohit K. Dasgupta and Kaustav Bakshi's observation of Bengali film director Rituparno Ghosh and Ghosh's use of queer self-styling in film and media is a valuable addition.

Zooming in on the fashion fantasies of young women in Chennai, Sneha Krishnan shows us an insider view of the negotiations that young, college-going middle class women go through in domestic spaces to find visibility and perform style within fashionable spaces such as malls and public thoroughfares. In the process of roaming about the city, they do style and define style. Krishnan brings in the very important question of class in this, by contrasting the viewpoints of upper middle class students and lower middle class students.

Teresa Kuldova investigates the nexus between nationalism and commercialism. Reminiscent of Kuldova's prior scholarship on luxury Indian fashion, the author explores the work of designer Nitin Bal Chauhan's brand *Bhootsavaar*. Chauhan's designs operate within an ecosystem of Indian designers who display nostalgia for a glorious past. Simultaneously the designs cater to young consumer citizens, known as "zippies". Sandya Hewamanne reflects on trouser-wearing in Sri Lanka. This chapter invokes a view of the Global South and its class distinctions against the backdrop of Free Trade Zone garment manufacturing and the experiences of its working class female employees. The documentary style of ethnographic writing adds to primary evidence-based epistemology.

Another analysis, by Paul Strickland, is of Bhutanese youth fashion, filling a much-needed gap in the South Asian dialogue. Strickland paints a view of the complex fashion sensibility from which the youth have to choose. Their clothes straddle an Asian and Western aesthetic centring on a government-imposed look of national dress. Issues of royal culture, power, nationalism and allegiance to Buddhism all shape clothes, how they are worn, and how they are understood. Sarah Shepherd-Manandhar enhances the volume with an exploration of clothes among couples who are arranged into marriage in urban Nepal. By challenging preconceived notions, Shepherd-Manandhar shows how the appropriate garments help women aim towards "desired futures through arranged marriages" (p. 166). With the right set of clothes, marriage-aged Nepali women are able to navigate their future lives and build agency. There remains a hierarchy in clothes, with party saris – the most modest and most expensive – at the top, followed by cheaper T-shirts and jeans, and finally the practical and inexpensive *kurta surewal* (tunic and lose pants), which also reinforces "modesty" or *ijat*. Interestingly, Priya Swamy renders a counterpoint by including young Hindustani diasporic women in Amsterdam. In the Dutch context, the term Hindustani refers to erstwhile Indian-heritage migrants in

Suriname. Swamy highlights how young women, heavily influenced by images in media, create a Hindu identity for themselves through dress.

As noted in the introduction, the study of the consumption and styling habits of South Asian youth – who are presently a significant portion of the world's 26 per cent youth – not only has ramifications for the global fashion industry but for many other industries as well. A slight dissatisfaction with this otherwise excellent book was the collaged cover image. This is a lost opportunity in design, as the cover was not as evocative as the topic merited. As a researcher and designer, I felt this space was underutilised. We know strong cover images can lead to greater engagement with the content, as is demonstrated within the volume by the evocative figures and plates in the individual chapters. The writing in the book is as strong as the internal imagery, and I have already assigned the introduction as a reading for my students of Costume, Fashion and Cultural Studies at City University of New York. As fashion and culture scholars, we hope for more books built on such decolonial fashion studies methodologies.

*Deepsikha Chatterjee*

Stephanie Coo, *Clothing the Colony: Nineteenth-Century Philippine Sartorial Culture, 1820–1896*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019. 550 pages, ₱1,500.00. ISBN 978-971-550-891-9

Dress is perhaps the most fundamental way that people share, without words, who they are, where they belong and what they want. In *Clothing the Colony*, Stephanie Coo highlights how evolving modes of fashion provide a critical lens to understanding nineteenth-century Philippine society, culture and politics. Utilising a vast array of sources, including colonial records, literature, artwork, photographs and historical pieces of clothing and fabric, Coo examines sartorial culture to reveal the politics of empire and nationalism, as well as evolving understandings of class, race and gender.

Coo argues that clothing served an important function in the colonial Philippines, revealing or concealing "status, affiliations, and values" (p. 1). In her book, she traces how clothing evolved over the course of the nineteenth century, highlighting a shift in colonial hierarchies from being primarily race-based to a multilayered definition of status influenced by race, wealth, education and social and political connections. By the late nineteenth century, Coo argues, sartorial culture stretched across lines of race and ethnicity, blurring lines between previously distinct classes. As men increasing turned to Western dress for professional attire, women's dress, and particularly the *baro't saya* (blouse

and skirt), which had evolved from the *traje de mestiza* (mestiza dress) to the *traje del país* (national dress), increasingly represented an emerging Filipino national identity.

Despite stressing the gradual convergence of dress, Coo also emphasises that dress was both fundamentally personal and flexible. Philippine elites would have owned both European and native articles of clothing and could chose to wear either, or some combination of both, depending on the situation or event. In addition, dress could be used for a variety of means; clothing could be functional but also aspirational, representative or transformative, conformist and radical. Certainly, as Coo shows, Spanish colonisers and Philippine elites spent quite a lot of time agonising about native non-elites wearing clothing associated with status and wealth, acknowledging the importance of public appearance for maintaining the imperial status quo.

Moreover, even as the *baro't saya* became the fashion for rich and poor, urban and rural, *mestiza* and *india* (the Spanish term for Filipinos) small differences in dress, including the quality of fabric, cut of clothing, fineness of embroidery and richness of accessories could still indicate status and allow one to position oneself in the colonial hierarchy. Coo notes, for example, that the choice to wear or discard the *tapís*, or overskirt, became connected with the choice to align with a European or native identity.

Over six chapters, Coo traces the evolution of fashion and clothing production in the islands. The first chapter provides context for the nineteenth-century colonial Philippines, including initial divisions along lines of race and the emergence of a middling class, which blurred the lines of race and class. Chapter Two delves into the actual production of textiles and clothing, including the changing economic and political contexts that led to the use of native fabrics like *piña* and *jusí* in garments for special occasions and in elite dress, while cheaper imported fabrics were used for non-elite garments and everyday clothing. Chapters Three and Four examine the changes in lowland, Christianised fashion for men and women. For women, this meant the emergence of *traje de mestiza* as a blend of European and native styles, and its adoption as the national costume, while men alternated between Western suits and native *baro*, depending on the occasion. Chapter Five explores the connection of clothing and presentation to Spanish and Philippine notions of cleanliness and propriety, as men and, especially, women were expected to balance the use of clothing to demonstrate both status and adherence to colonial mores. Coo's final chapter highlights the complexity of the dress of Europeans and Chinese in the Philippines. While ostensibly faithful to home fashions, Europeans utilised native clothing for a variety of reasons, including personal comfort and diplomacy, while Chinese migrants were less apt to use dress to claim status, and when they did do so, it was more frequently according to Chinese notions of hierarchy and appearance than Filipino.

Coo argues that as dress in the Philippines evolved over the course of the nineteenth century, fashions for mestizos and indios converged, and "local and regional variations in clothing slowly disappeared" (p. 428). This convergence of dress, she continues, supports the claim that a sense of national identity had emerged by the late nineteenth century. This connection between fashion and national identity is one of the most interesting parts of Coo's work, and one that could be developed further. The importance of clothing, and material culture more broadly, in helping lowland, Christianised peoples in different parts of the islands to see themselves as one people is worthy of further study.

There is also at times some slippage between Coo's sources and her own scholarly voice. The use of phrases like "fossilized state of savagery" (p. 47) when referring to non-Christians, or the of the idiom "a monkey, however richly dressed, is but a monkey" (pp. 45–46) when discussing a play about an Aeta man wooing a Tagalog woman, without attribution to a specific source, could be misread as part of Coo's analysis, rather than as an echo of her sources or the beliefs of nineteenth-century elites.

Ultimately, however, Coo's work is an impressive piece of scholarship. It is thoroughly grounded in the recent scholarship on the Philippines, and she deftly weaves an understanding of the changing colonial context into her discussion of the evolution of dress. The book is also beautifully printed, with almost one hundred illustrations to track the evolution of fashion throughout the century. Her descriptions of fabric and clothing are so evocative that one can almost imagine holding samples of the textiles while reading about them. *Clothing the Colony* is an invaluable guide to the history of Philippine fashion and clothing production. This book will be essential reading for a wide audience, from scholars of the Spanish empire and colonialism in the Philippines to students of dress, fashion and textiles.

*Sarah Steinbock-Pratt*

Katherine Mezur / Emily Wilcox, *Corporeal Politics: Dancing East Asia*. (Studies in Dance History). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020. 372 pages, 32 illustrations, $39.95. ISBN 978-0-472-05455-8 (pb)

Katherine Mezur and Emily Wilcox should be congratulated for not only contributing to but also expanding the field of East Asian Dance and Performance Studies. Their co-edited volume, *Corporeal Politics: Dancing East Asia*, deserves recognition as a milestone in this growing field. Emily Wilcox's introduction expresses the importance of a regional approach to the varied styles of dance throughout East Asia and highlights "corporeal politics" as a unifying method-

ology for the sixteen case studies collected in this truly interdisciplinary, transnational volume, with contributors based across East Asia and the United States (p. 2). Wilcox proceeds to delve into the ways in which Critical Area Studies methodologies and anti-Orientalist approaches have been able to offer insights for East Asian Dance Studies, from the late 1960s to the present.

The introduction further articulates the central methodological tenets of *Corporeal Politics* by invoking "East Asia" as a framing concept – that is, the volume's emphasis on deep historical and cultural contextualisation, its use of original sources in East Asian languages, and its method of following the logic of East Asian history, rather than treating US or European models as universal (p. 7). Based on its respect for and insistence on the linguistic, cultural and historical specificities of the forms of East Asian dances it examines, *Corporeal Politics* foregrounds the inventiveness of East Asian dancers and choreographers and the creativity and transnational qualities of East Asian dance forms. More importantly, it locates dance within the broader structures of power and knowledge by offering sustained politicised readings of dancing bodies in East Asia in the tradition of Critical Area Studies and Critical Dance Studies.

Radical contextualisation is at the heart of the methodology of *Corporeal Politics*. The sixteen chapters of the book are organised into five thematic parts. Part 1, "Contested Genealogies", consists of three chapters on China. In the first chapter, "Sexuality, Status, and the Female Dancer", Beverly Bossler argues that the association between dance and sexual allure in China and East Asia made female dancers and males who performed feminine roles inherently transgressive figures. This chapter sets the stage for the future chapters, as according to Bossler, "the legacies of imperial Chinese practices and attitudes still influence the social conditions and meanings of dance and dancers in East Asia today" (p. 25).

"Mei Lanfang and Modern Dance" analyses Mei Lanfang's cross-gender stage performances and the writings of his close artistic collaborator Qi Rushan. Catherine Yeh argues that dance operated as a modernising force in Chinese theatre. She demonstrates how dance represented a new language of the "civilised" vitality of modernity that could be incorporated into Peking opera (p. 48). In this sense, the modernity of Peking opera shares the trajectory of modern dance in the US and Europe, borrowing from both foreign cultures and one's own cultural traditions, and distinguishing itself from other forms of cultural hybrids.

In "The Conflicted Monk", Nan Ma compares two choreographies based on the *Si fan* ("Longing for the Mundane") story, one staged in 1921 by female Japanese dancer Fujikage Shizue and the other in 1942 by male Chinese dancer Wu Xiaobang. Ma argues that Fujikage appropriated the modernity that came to be associated with *Si fan*'s rebellious theme to make a gesture of "breaking away" from the formal and thematic constraints of traditional Japanese dance, while maintaining its difference from Western dance (p. 68). She goes on to ex-

amine how Wu Xiaobang's concern about the unity of the mind and the body was ultimately utopian in the age of mass popular culture, in which the dancing body was irreversibly objectified and commodified (p. 73).

Part 2 is entitled "Decolonizing Migration" and consists of four chapters. The contribution written by Kazuko Kuniyoshi and translated from Japanese by Yuda Kenji emphasises Murayama Tomoyoshi's attempts to approach Western dance as an equal and from a contemporary perspective. Based on his studies in Germany, Murayama proposed "conscious constructivism" as a new concept of fine art. According to Kuniyoshi, this was Murayama's inventive way of presenting fresh and powerful visual materials, rather than a direct influence of Russian Constructivists (p. 90). By focusing on Murayama Tomoyoshi and his creative synthesis of Western dance, this chapter challenges the accepted view of modern Japanese dance history as part of the history of the importation of Western culture to Japan.

"Korean Dance beyond Koreanness", written by Okju Son, explores how Park Yeong-in, through his Korean-themed *Sinmuyong* dance pieces performed in Europe, negotiated complex political and cultural positions, and expressed hybridity in his movement language and characterisations. A central problematic raised by this chapter, relevant to other parts of East Asia and other chapters in this volume, is why Korean *Sinmuyong*, which literally means "New Dance", is paradoxically associated with stylised, reformed or even "pseudo" Korean dance (p. 102). Okju Son shows that Park utilised Korean and Japanese culture to choreograph a new kind of dance that connected him to his European audiences. In this sense, Park Yeong-in's experiments on Korean dance became a means to modernise dance. His understanding of ethnicity was framed by the discourse of modernity, which enabled him to invent a multidimensional tradition to choreograph dance pieces that spoke to wider audiences.

Emily Wilcox, one of the co-editors of the book, asks in "Diasporic Moves" how the notion of Overseas Chinese identity might change our understanding of the life and work of Dai Ailian. By focusing on Dai Ailian's September 1940 performance in Hong Kong and March 1946 performance in Chongqing, Wilcox shows that Dai's choreography embodied a localised and evolving approach to representing Chinese identity, performing a Sinophone epistemology enabled by her diasporic experiences (p. 117). She borrows from Shu-mei Shih's notion of "multiply-angulaed critique" – which acknowledges multiple cultural affiliations while maintaining a critical distance from them – to fruitfully analyse Dai's choreographies as responses to her intercultural experiences (p. 126).

The final chapter of part 2 is "Choreographing Neoliberal Marginalization" by Ji Hyon (Kayla) Yuh. The author argues that the dramatic and physical representation of non-Korean characters on the musical stage reveals how Koreans understand race and racialised others within the current neoliberal, multicultural political economy in South Korea (p. 136). The chapter compares different

representations of two non-Korean characters, Solongos from Mongolia and Michael from the Philippines, in the musical *Bballae* ("Laundry") and argues that these articulated differences in their choreography ultimately foreshadow their different fates in the story.

Part 3, "Militarization and Empire", consists of another three chapters: "Masking Japanese Militarism as a Dream of Sino-Japanese Friendship" by Mariko Okada, "Imagined Choreographies" by Tara Rodman, focusing on the modern dancer Itō Michio, and "Exorcism and Reclamation", in which Ya-ping Chen interprets Taiwanese contemporary choreographer Lin Lee-chen's 1995 work *Jiao* (Miroirs de Vie / Mirrors of Life) as an exorcism of the militarised body and a reclamation of sensuous and empathic life.

In the first chapter of "Socialist Aesthetics" (Part 4), Suzy Kim excavates the post-1946 career of Choe Seung-hui, one of the most renowned figures in early twentieth-century East Asian dance. Echoing preceding chapters of the volume, this chapter further demonstrates how an ideological agenda often went hand in hand with individual ambitions, connecting the personal with the political.

Dong Jiang's chapter "The Dilemma of Chinese Classical Dance" contends that "the argument over traditional or contemporary is like a ruler or mirror that can provide artists with corrections at the right moment" (p. 237). In "Negotiating Chinese Identity through a Double-Minority Voice and the Female Dancing Body" Ting-Ting Chang argues that ethnic minority dances such as those of Yang Liping make China more visible to the world and that the peacock dance specifically serves to reinforce an imagined transnational Chinese community in an era of globalisation (p. 242). Moreover, Chang carefully attends to the economic aspect of cultural exports such as the peacock dance, highlighting how such a cultural form remains tied to Yunnanese identity, bringing financial benefit back to the Yunnan region and its ethnic minority communities.

Part 5 finally collects three texts under the headline "Collective Technologies". Here, Katherine Mezur, the other co-editor of the volume, addresses the work of Ashikawa Yoko and Furukawa Anzu, two Japanese women artists who were central to the domestic and transnational evolution of *butoh* from the 1970s to the 2000s. The chapter considers these artists' contributions to the world of *butoh* within the confluences of Japan's gender discrimination in the arts, the US occupation and postwar conditions, as well as issues of single authorship in collective art making processes (p. 262). Mezur argues that the two women artists' diverse collective performances offer examples of a decolonised corporeal politics embedded in the located temporalities of East Asia. She recognises the importance of bringing these two women artists forward and into the light of performance historiography, which "should provoke and inspire a reimagination of *butoh*'s genealogy beyond any singular lineage and

a recognition of the complexity of their diverse collective art labor" (p. 264). The chapter's emphasis on Ashikawa and Furukawa's radical kinaesthetic imaginary with their bodies, and their performance and choreography of fantastic extensions of (often posthuman) forms drawing on a wide range of cultural resources, is echoed in Chapter 16, the final chapter of the volume. This chapter by Yatin Lin, entitled "Choreographing Digital Performance in Twenty-First-Century Taiwan", examines Huang Yi & KUKA as a case study to interrogate the production of experimental dances involving collaborations between humans and digital technologies in the context of twenty-first-century Taiwan.

Before this, however, in "Fans, Sashes, and Jesus" Soo Ryon Yoon analyses the use of dance in anti-LGBTQ activism by right-wing Christian Protestant groups in South Korea, while also considering how queer activists and their allies reappropriate national dance styles and imbue them with new meanings. Soo Ryon Yoon argues that church groups choose a combination of dance and songs not simply to proselytise, but to present their nationalist political ideology with the goal of building their power within and outside of South Korea (p. 285). According to Yoon, the queer parallel to the Christian fan dance demonstrates how a traditional performance emblematic of "Koreanness" comes to produce new affective engagements through a "queer" choreography, while the evangelical activists' singing and dancing become a process of territorialising Christian hegemony and "proper" Koreanness at the expense of queer Koreans.

Centrally concerned with decolonisation, the coda of the book, "To Dance East Asia", again by Katherine Mezur, suggests that what stands out across the different approaches covered in this volume is "*movement* and its powerful potential for deployment by artists" (p. 318). Mezur drives home the argument that dancers are cultural citizens and agents of power who, through their dance movements, can lead and create social movements. The power of dance can be seen both by its promotors and those who want to place it under control: on the one hand, dancers deploy their bodies to drive action and move the world; on the other hand, the myriad forces that carefully manipulate dancing bodies to their ends also understand the significance of such bodies in propelling political and social action.

*Corporeal Politics* is a richly diverse and thoroughly rewarding read, one that makes the reader stop and reflect. I very much appreciate Emily Wilcox's emphasis in the introduction on extending the critique of whiteness in US dance studies (p. 8). At the same time, using "decentring whiteness" to frame this volume might not best serve the purpose of centring East Asian dancers and following the logic of East Asian dance histories. As for the individual chapters, I find Ji Hyon (Kayla) Yuh's focus on the South Korean musical *Bballae* (Chapter 7) less directly related to dance and choreography as it now stands. It might help to discuss the dialectics between choreography (movement) and stillness (lack of movement) early in the chapter. If these central dynamics

could be raised earlier and with more intentionality, it might help to situate this chapter better in the volume. Similarly, a close reading of specific case studies could have strengthened the thematic cohesion of the article by Dong Jiang (Chapter 12) and its examination of the dilemma of Chinese classical dance.

With its chapter-length, theoretically informed introduction and coda, as well as sixteen richly referenced chapters based on original research in Chinese, Japanese, Korean and English, *Corporeal Politics* breaks new ground in East Asian Dance Studies through its dual contribution to Dance Studies and East Asian Studies. It should be read by anyone interested in dance history, the East Asian region, its rich transregional and transnational cultural histories, and the politics of dance in East Asia and throughout the world.

*Liang Luo*

Megan Brankley Abbas, *Whose Islam? The Western University and Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. 255 pages, EUR 28.85. ISBN 978-1-5036-2793-2

*Whose Islam? The Western University and Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia* by US-American historian Megan Brankley Abbas examines the deep entanglement of Indonesia's state-funded Islamic higher education system with Western academies. While in recent years, much research has focused on Indonesia's religious relations with other parts of the Muslim world, mostly the Arab region, this book draws attention to the strong impact that "the West" and its academic landscape have exerted on Indonesian Islamic intellectualism, which has led to the gradual emergence of new forms of religious, academic, bureaucratic and political authority in the archipelago. Against the backdrop of Cold War geopolitics, the author presents the development of new academic Islamic study centres in Western countries and examines how they shaped the way Muslim Indonesian exchange students began to approach Islam through a Western academic lens. These Western-educated graduates came to occupy elite positions within the Indonesian university system, bureaucracy and politics, modernising the country in the model of Western narratives. These Western impulses triggered new cleavages in Indonesian Islamic thought, separating admirers of the combination of Western and Islamic scientific traditions from defenders of the classical approaches to the study of Islam.

The author expands her work beyond the Indonesian case study by linking her findings to the broader issues of Orientalism, othering and the controversial question of who should be allowed to study Islam academically. Hence, the book includes a critical reflection on the positionality of non-Muslim scholars of Islam

as well as that of Muslims. The book thus approaches its topic – Indonesian academic exchange with the West – from several perspectives and is based on a broad spectrum of sources, drawing on secondary sources, archival work, biographical accounts, some interviews and Indonesian-language books authored by key Indonesian scholars who studied in the West. The author expresses herself in a clear and easily accessible style, which makes this book an enjoyable reading experience. Framed by an introduction and a conclusion, the book's five chapters masterfully trace the history of the transnational connections of Indonesian Islamic higher education, with key geographical stations being the Institute of Islamic Studies (IIS) at Canada's McGill University (Chapter Two) and the University of Chicago (Chapter Four), with its developmentalist exchange programme on Islam that sought to attract Indonesian students.

Throughout the book, the author convincingly argues that the academic experiences of Indonesian students of Islam at Western universities bred a strong cohort of what she calls "fusionists". According to Abbas, fusionists "reject the dualist bifurcation of knowledge as artificial and instead champion a more unified and universal conception of truth, [...] transcend the discursive boundary between the Islamic and Western intellectual tradition, [... and are] closely connected to Islamic modernism" (p. 7). As such, fusionists are "mediators between Western institutions and Muslim communities" (p. 8). It is likely that "fusionism", a term the author already introduced in her 2017 journal article "Between Western Academia and Pakistan: Fazlur Rahman and the Fight for Fusionism" (*Modern Asian Studies* 51(3), pp. 736–768), will serve as a useful conceptual tool in future discussions on Indonesian Islamic thought.

While authors such as Ronald Lukens-Bull (2013), Carool Kersten (2011), David Webster (2009), Howard M. Federspiel (2006), Ali Munhanif (1996), Saiful Muzani (1994) and Karel Steenbrink (1990)[1] have pointed towards Indonesia's connectivities with Western universities, Abbas's work is the first monograph that systematically and thoroughly describes the history of the phenomenon and its wide-ranging political and religious repercussions. This fact makes the book an important contribution to the field of Indonesian Islamic (higher) education as well as Indonesian Islamic thought and Indonesian Islam and politics more broadly. In light of the preceding existing works, empirically, the book does not hold too many surprises for scholars already familiar with the history and political function of the Indonesian Islamic higher education

1 See Ronald Lukens-Bull: *Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia: Continuity and Conflict*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; Carool Kersten: *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam*. London: Hurst, 2011; David Webster: *Fire and the Full Moon: Canada and Indonesia in a Decolonizing World*. Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 2009; Howard M. Federspiel: *Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals of the 20th Century*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006; Ali Munhanif: Islam and the Struggle for Religious Pluralism in Indonesia: A Political Reading of the Religious Thought of Mukti Ali. *Studia Islamika* 1996 / 3(1), pp. 79–126; Saiful Muzani: Mu'tazila Theology and Modernization of the Indonesian Muslim Community: Intellectual Portray of Harun Nasution. *Studia Islamika* 1994 / 1(1), pp. 91–131; Karel A. Steenbrink: The Study of Comparative Religion by Indonesian Muslims: A Survey. *Numen* 1990 / 37(2), pp. 141–167.

system. The so-called "McGill mafia" extensively treated in Chapter Two – the alumni cohort of Montreal's IIS, which under Suharto occupied key positions in the state bureaucracy and remains significant today – is a well-known phenomenon to contemporary Indonesianists, as is the Chicago connection to which Chapter Four is dedicated.

The empirical novelty of Abbas's book, and its strength, is that it also presents newly discovered materials from the archives – personal letters and critical reports on study programmes and the individuals involved – which add new perspectives and reveal hidden details of the academic exchanges and international encounters. In this way, the author shows that not all programmes reached their aims, that failure and personal frustration on both sides were also part of the story and that some Indonesian students decided to reject the proposed Western academic ideas and approaches to religion altogether. Furthermore, Abbas discusses several Indonesian-language works authored by Indonesian intellectuals, thereby making them accessible to English-speaking readers.

Of the nine interviews the author conducted, only two were undertaken with Indonesian interlocutors. A greater number of interviews with Western-trained Indonesian intellectuals might have had offered additional first-hand assessments on the exchanges. Although Abbas conducted an interview with political scientist Howard M. Federspiel on his study years at McGill University in the 1950s, during which he came in contact with Indonesian students, none of his works are referenced. This is surprising, as in his 2006 book *Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals of the 20th Century* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) and his 1991 journal article "Muslim Intellectuals and Indonesia's National Development" (*Asian Survey* 31(3), pp. 232–246), Federspiel already referred to the Western university as a crucial driver for critical thinking in Indonesia and pointed out the key role of Muslim intellectuals in the state-driven modernisation discourse, thus anticipating some arguments made by Abbas. An aspect that strikes the (European) reader is that by "the Western university" Abbas basically means "the North American University", as only empirical examples from Canada and the US are presented. The Indonesian-Netherlands Islamic Studies (INIS) programme that began in 1988, with a history of previous exchanges from 1969 to 1984, is only mentioned in passing (pp. 152–153; p. 221, fn. 152). Thus the role of Europe, and especially the former colonial power, the Netherlands, in shaping Indonesian Islamic thought and political life through academic collaboration remains undiscussed.

Due to her background as a historian, Abbas only briefly mentions more contemporary developments within the Indonesian Islamic academic milieu. She touches upon the progressive role of several Western-trained alumni during the democratisation process but does not discuss the several attempts to "Arabise" Indonesian campuses by, for example, implementing the Egyptian al-Azhar Islamic Studies programme at what is today the State Islamic University

Jakarta in 2001, or the many initiatives from Saudi Arabia (through LIPIA – Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab / Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies, for instance) and Iran (through ICAS – Islamic College for Advanced Studies, which has ceased to exist). Furthermore, Indonesia has recently started to export its own epistemologies on Islam to a global Muslim academic audience. Future research will have to engage with the ongoing increasing diversification of international academic actors and their political agendas in Indonesia as well as the active export of Indonesian academic concepts. For the comparative contextualisation of these much-needed investigations, Abbas's book will serve as a key reference.

*Amanda tho Seeth*

Hajriyanto Y. Thohari, *Anthropology of the Arabs. Coretan-coretan Etnografis dari Beirut*. Yogyakarta: Penerbit Suara Muhammadiyah, 2021. 286 pages, 100.000 IDR. ISBN 978-602-6268-82-2

The Indonesian-language book *Anthropology of the Arabs – Coretan-coretan Etnografis dari Beirut* (*Ethnographic Scribbles from Beirut*) by Hajriyanto Y. Thohari, the current Indonesian ambassador to Lebanon, provides ethnographic descriptions of Lebanese culture, with comparative references to Indonesia. The book consists of 47 short chapters, which are structured in six sections: ethnographic notes, language, nationhood, politics, the Arab peoples and Others, and personal anecdotes from Beirut.

The first section introduces Lebanese society through examples from everyday philosophy and culture: specific small-talk, religious practice, names, clothing, art, food, gender roles and marriage customs, dance and academia. Emic terms are given in Arabic and explanatory sections draw comparisons with Indonesian society and culture. Section 2 begins with an acknowledgement of Arabic as the language of the holy Qur'an and then shifts the focus to the everyday use of Arabic. This includes linguistic and philological observations on differences between Arabic and other languages. The author argues that Arabic is intrinsically linked with the history of Islam while also serving as the native language of non-Muslim Arabs, which means that even non-Muslim Arabs use expressions that might be attributed to Islam, rendering the language complex and diversified.

The third section is dedicated to the historical theme of nation building and covers events up to the present time, with the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and Lebanon's severe economic crisis. Thohari introduces the country's history with an emphasis on Ottoman and French influences and its current

power-sharing system, which is based on confessionalism – meaning, for instance, that the post of president is always filled by a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister's post by a Sunni Muslim, and further positions by members of the Shia and Eastern Orthodox Christian minorities. The chapters of this section raise awareness of the interreligious and interethnic complexities and conflicts in Lebanon, including current demographic changes and the rising influence of the Shia militia Hezbollah. The section also includes a chapter on Indonesian-Lebanese relations, pointing out that Indonesia has sent the largest contingent of troops to the UN peace-keeping mission UNIFIL and arguing that Lebanon is an important hub for Indonesian exports.

An overview of political dynamics, especially civil society activism, is given in section 4. Thohari praises Lebanon as the most democratic and pluralist Arab country, arguing that French colonialism had a significant influence on the liberal social order. On the role of women, the author notes: "*Kaum perempuan Lebanon juga tampil di wilayah public tanpa hambatan budaya dan psikososial yang berarti* [Lebanese women also appear in the public sphere without significant cultural and psychosocial barriers]" (p. 156). Furthermore, this section discusses Lebanon's entanglement in international conflicts in the context of Shia alliances between Iran and Hezbollah, and the wars in Yemen and Syria. With regard to Israel, the book explains that the conflict is not between Lebanon and Israel but rather between Hezbollah and Israel.

The fifth section discusses the role of various other peoples in relation to Lebanese society, including the West, the larger Arab World, Indonesia and ethnic minorities within Lebanon, for instance Palestinian refugees, the Kurds and the Druze. The relationship between Indonesia and Lebanon is contextualised in the broader discussion about the widespread conflation of Islam and Arabness. With reference to the diversity of the Arab World, Hajriyanto Thohari argues that phrases like *Indonesia bukan Arab* (Indonesia is not Arab; p. 204) are misleading because they create an incorrect assumption of a monolithic Arab culture. Finally, the last section consists of three anecdotes from Beirut featuring the author's personal experiences.

With this large variety of themes, the book is a comprehensive introduction to Lebanon and the Middle East. It raises awareness of the diversity of Arab cultures and is a valuable read for anyone interested in intercultural encounters between Indonesia and the Arab World. The numerous references to Indonesia and the book's publication in Bahasa Indonesia are aimed at an Indonesian readership. Yet it is also of great interest for readers of other backgrounds. As with every ethnography, the book provides information both on the culture and society being described and on the authors' own cultural background. Hajriyanto Thohari makes conscious use of this double function. His own Javanese background and positionality as Indonesian ambassador to Lebanon is made transparent through self-reflexive sections that allow readers to draw

conclusions about Lebanon and Indonesia, about Indonesian views on the Middle East and about intercultural encounters.

As Thohari himself explains in one of the chapters: "*Tulisan ini hanya berdasarkan pengamatan semata, dan inipun bukan pengamatan dalam pengertian observasi seperti yang biasa dilakukan dalam sebuah penelitian ilmiah* [This writing is only based on observations, and even this is not an observation in the sense of an observation in scientific research]" (p. 44). Many sections of the book present anecdotal evidence through an academic lens, from which the author develops questions for further research and suggests related literature. Given the broad variety of themes, the author does not engage with specific scholarly debates at length but refers in a general way to questions from several academic fields. Among other topics that the author touches upon is the current intra-Indonesian debate about the place of Arab-Islamic traditions in Indonesia, for instance claims of Arabisation, which the author denounces as a simplification. This argument corresponds to scholarly observations on the imaginations and localisations of Arabness in Indonesia, for instance by Sumit Mandal, Martin Slama, Mona Abaza, and my own research.

The comparative references to Indonesia, reflections on Islam and arguments on Indonesian-Lebanese relations mirror the deep insights of Hajriyanto Thohari's many years in government service and his role in Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second largest Muslim organisation. Thus the book is undoubtedly a rich source for Indonesian and Lebanese people who work in international relations, and for scholars of Anthropology, International Relations, Asian Studies and Middle Eastern Studies.

*Mirjam Lücking*

Ruth Streicher, *Uneasy Military Encounters: The Imperial Politics of Counter-insurgency in Southern Thailand*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020. 186 pages, $25.95. ISBN 978-1-5017-5133-2 (pb)

After centuries of conflict, the contestation of identities and power in the Deep South of Thailand has unfolded into two configurations. At the general level, the Thai state has applied forceful power to confront and suppress Malay Muslims, based on discourses of imperial state formation. On the other hand, amidst delicate social and political dynamics over years, the symbolic contestations among people have also evolved at the local and individual levels. These encounters involve individuals within the state apparatus, communities, groups, individual Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims and others, who have intensely interacted, competed and bargained for their identities. Satisfaction, frustration, misconception as well as irritation have been the result.

Ruth Streicher's *Uneasy Military Encounters: The Imperial Politics of Counterinsurgency in Southern Thailand* attempts to bridge the differences between these two configurations through a combination of political ethnography with genealogy, a rare approach in similar studies of the conflict. As a young Western researcher new to the entanglements of violent conflict in Pattani Province, the author's aim is to not only investigate "military forms of knowledge production as part of an imperial project but also to trace how notions of difference that constitute Thailand's state formation have evolved and now materialize in concrete encounters" (p. 14).

Notions about the formation of local states and identity in the southern peninsula, particularly among the Malay Muslims of Pattani, can be traced back to the thirteenth century, and especially to the moment when the former Hindu state converted to Islam around the fourteenth century. To consolidate its centrifugal power, subjugating defiant Pattani vassals, Siam carried out brutal suppression leading to violent displacement through five subsequent defeats in the eighteenth century. In recent years, the complex situation of the current Deep South conflict necessitates several empirical and theoretical interpretations. Besides Duncan McCargo (*Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand*. Ithaca / London: Cornell University Press, 2008), Chaiwat Satha-Anand (in Duncan McCargo (ed.): *Rethinking Thailand's Southern Violence*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2007) makes an interesting interpretation of the bullet monument in Dusun-nyor of Narathiwat province, which commemorates the suppression of a violent Muslim uprising in 1948, comparing it to the Kru-Ze incident in 2004. Symbolic connection theory is used here to relate the former to the latter, rendering a representation of the "truth" management by the Thai state to lives of Malay Muslims in a general picture.

In the same manner, Ruth Streicher adds another dimension to the understanding of the complex realities of the conflict on the ground. Her in-depth and systematic accounts unfold from an interpretation of counterinsurgency shaped by Michel Foucault's notion of "police power" – the analysis of counterinsurgency as a process of policing the population through the production of knowledge on cultural difference. A defining factor is thus "historicism": the fact that the imperial modernisation project has constructed temporal and spatial differences for civilised progress ushers in the concept of cultural difference while turning it into a hierarchical regime with an assumption of rigidly linear progress. In consequence, modern Thai history deliberately omits Siam's imperial invasion of former principalities and tributary states, particularly in Pattani, while fabricating a gendered and racialised discourse that Thais are protected from external colonial powers by the paternalistic monarchy (pp. 17–18).

At the macro level, Streicher illustrates how Siam's modern military reproduced imperial structures of difference by imitating Western imperialism. The structures as such were internalised by Siam's military through multiple forms

of "disciplinary power". However, counterinsurgency in Thailand has transformed into another aspect of state formation, involving "a modern state formation with roots in the premodern Buddhist empire of Siam that secures its survival by constructing the southern Muslim population as essentially and hierarchically different" (p. 2). The author makes a strong theoretical argument that central to this discursivity is Western imperialism of "modern categories of race and religion" that shaped the racialised, religious, and gendered Otherness of Pattani. This is the major insight of this book.

To emphasise the connection between the macro analysis of Thai imperial formation and micro narratives, or discursive practices, has been formulated by enforcing counterinsurgency war campaigns. As mentioned above, Streicher carefully analyses the counterinsurgency of the Thai state by using Michel Foucault's notion of police power. In Foucault's lectures at the College de France during 1977–1978 (2004), the word "police" is clearly narrated. The new meaning of the word "police" in seventeenth century Europe referred to "the set of means by which the state's forces can be increased while preserving the state in good order". Indeed, it involved a dynamic yet controllable relationship between the state's internal order and the development of state forces. Streicher uses this conceptual framework to interpret the functions of the Siamese state from the early twentieth century while adding another dimension of imperial state formation that Siamese royal elites also appropriated from Western imperialist countries. The political programme of King Chulalongkorn was based on the assumption that history was a "discipline" that acted both as an objective norm for ruling the kingdom as well as a means for governing his subjects. Siamese sovereignty had unfolded through an imperial formation incorporating different city-states into its racialised territories. For the king, it was necessary that Siam's imperial history absorb all local histories into a unitary state, with the presumption of civilisation and continuous, linear progress (p. 18). Based on this assumption, the design of Siam's modern armed forces was not for any external defence but intended to be a counterinsurgency army.

The basic underlying dimension of the counterinsurgency approach, following the classical theories of David Galula, is the production of knowledge for governmentality. Constructing knowledge has become the significant marker of counterinsurgency since the beginning of the imperial form of policing and was reborn during the Cold War. The Thai military, also influenced by American military doctrine, has collected and applied cultural knowledge in order to conduct counterinsurgency warfare. McFate (2005) reveals that the use of anthropological knowledge collected for the counterinsurgency programme in Thailand during the 1970s led to the "Thai Scandal" in American academia. In the process, the military-constructed "objective truth" gave a boost to the discourse of linear, paternalistic and progressive imperial formation. Alternative histories were identified as misguided and treacherous (p. 20).

Moreover, Streicher asserts that the concept of racism is closely associated with imperial formation. It is a central element of "imperial modernity" in which the mobilisation of race was the hidden discourse of building Siam as a modern nation-state. The author shows how race was used for "measuring, enumerating, and dividing up populations in accordance with central state-building practices such as maps and statistics, locating those populations' differences in physical properties such as skin color" (p. 38). Beginning from the nineteenth century, Siam's traditional elites claimed that the emerging modern state was a place for Thai inhabitants, whereas in southern Thailand, the racial discourse rendered a new distinction, stating that Pattani was now seen as a territory in which the majority of people belong to the "Malay race". Concurrently, fabricated by the royal discourse of King Chulalongkorn, Prince Damrong and King Vajiravudh, the construction of a "Thai race" was strengthened and combined with Buddhism, the Thai nation and the Thai state in twentieth-century Siam (p. 39). The current Thai military intentionally consolidates the racialised category in its counterinsurgency handbook. It has become central to the operation of "police" power in contemporary Thai counterinsurgency.

The nationalism-cum-racism argument ushers in the new interpretation of counterinsurgency that emerged in Thailand over decades. Scholars who study the Southern counterinsurgency, such as Jeff M. Moore (2013), have explained that Thai counterinsurgency (COIN) is strongly influenced by the writings of David Galula and Robert Thompson, but there is also a "Thai way of COIN." Politics-leads-military was a linchpin for Thai COIN from the 1980s to the 2000s. Moore finds that these tenets have influenced Thai military strategy towards the conflicts in the Deep South. Implementation of the three pillars of COIN – security, political and economic measures – in the Southern conflict appears to be effective, if slowly, but the political discourse behind these pillars is not clearly explicated. In a recent study, Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat (2019) use historical institutionalism to make the argument that Thai security forces' preference for a hard-line policy in the Deep South has resulted in a vicious cycle of tension and violence between security officials and local Malay-Muslims that has not been conducive to peace efforts in the region. Despite a decent structural analysis, narratives about practical interactions between actors, agencies and structure on the ground are still inadequate. Seeing counterinsurgency through the lens of discourse on imperial state formation with the racialised, religious, and gendered Otherness of Pattani's people could represent another way of accounting for the military encounters on the ground.

As such, a distinction of Thailand's Southern counterinsurgency is revealed in the military's daily life experiences in the checkpoints and their activities in managing the young Malay Muslims in the Yalannanbaru training camp. The multiplicity of encounters represents the true character of the Thai state and

the negative relationships between structural discourse and local agencies in different times and spaces. As Foucault (1994) put it when he conducted an archaeology of clinical science, "seeing is knowing". At checkpoints, one can see Thai soldiers involved repeatedly with discourses specifically connecting Malay Muslim men, clad mostly in traditional sarongs, to the threat of insurgency (p. 46). These suspects at checkpoints are depicted as unmanly, weak and misguided by ideology, an effect of the underdeveloped Deep South. The racialised hierarchy of masculinities leads to "practices of suspicion" developed by Thai imperial formation. Seen through Streicher's gaze, Thai Buddhist soldiers perform civilised superiority over racialised and feminised Malay Muslim subjects (p. 47). Streicher reads from her observations that, clearly, the major task of soldiers at the checkpoints is not to protect civic order against any attacks by insurgents with military efficiency, but to further discourse on imperial state formation with racial, religious and gender prejudices.

Another example of the paternalistic state is presented in the description of the Yalannanbaru training camp. Military officers who are Buddhists teach young Muslim men to correct their practice of Islam. Disciplinary power enforces the political discourse here. As a consequence, young Muslim men are disciplined and transformed into religious subjects to be incorporated into the Thai imperial state formation. The whole disciplinary process "depends on the imbrication of Buddhism and statehood" (p. 64). Malay students in Yalannanbaru are trained to perform *katanyu* – an act of gratitude – regularly and repeatedly. Gratitude embodies the influence of Theravada Buddhist tradition, the belief that action today is dependent on past actions to be recognised as the accomplishment of moral virtue in order to have felicitous life in the future. For this, people must be compelled to practice ethical reflection and enact rituals to progress along the Buddhist path while opening themselves to feelings that are considered in the secular production of proper religious subjects. This is a complex process of assimilating and incorporating Muslim subjects into the Thai imperial formation (p. 71). The author therefore interprets the training courses at Yalannanbaru as a form of discipline in the Foucauldian sense, as they construct norms that classify individuals hierarchically and rely on Theravada Buddhist notions of religion and morality to place individuals on the moral path. The monastic way of training is similar to Buddhist ordination to promote self-discipline, male maturation and strength in the Thai Buddhist context (p. 73).

The climax of a "therapeutic counterinsurgency intervention" appears to be the ritual of showing confessions written by participants to their mothers. It is the moment of salvation based on a discourse that positions young Malay Muslims as failed subjects under the imperial order of the national family. As the author puts it: "Repentance, in this military framework, promoted participants' self-subjectification under moral norms that sustain the Thai imperial formation" (p. 84).

Emotions, romantic love and happiness have been instrumental in discursive practices of counterinsurgency. The micro-physics of power works through complex power relationships. Beginning from replacing the royal system of polygyny with a discourse of national love, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, r. 1910–1925) mobilised the connection between love and the national family. In the current Deep South conflict, the discourse of love is also used as an explicit political strategy of the Southern counterinsurgency. The imperial practice nurtures affective discourse among local Malay Muslims considered as racially and religiously different from others (p. 95). There are many incidents to substantiate the claim that the Otherness of the southern provinces underlies both the promulgation of love in counterinsurgency policy and the narratives of cross-cultural romance (p. 96). This is also the visible bridge linking structural discourses and delicate discursivity at the micro, individual level.

In the final chapter the author fiercely dissects the junta's main motto, "Returning Happiness to the People" – also the title of a song penned by leader of the junta, Prayut Chan-O-Cha, himself. Directly invoking the glorious history of Siam's old royal empire, the junta leader uses the term "happiness" (*khwam suk*) to include paternal benevolence, the Thai race and Buddhist religion (p. 110). The Thai discourse has established that Sukothai, arguably the first Thai kingdom, was the "quintessence of a happy polity" and military rulers have been patriarchal protectors of Thai people for a long, linear history. This is a metaphorical narrative that implies a gendered binary that masculinises the protectors and feminises those protected. Again, the discourse is reminiscent of the imperial contexts in which a paternalistic government feminised colonial subjects. This influence has been so strong that in many Thai constitutions, sovereignty has been defined as "the sovereign power belongs to the Thai people" but "the King as Head of State shall exercise such power". Ironically, based on this discourse, Thai-style democracy has always denied sovereignty to the Thai people.

Overall, the book's methodology, which combines ethnography with genealogy, makes a pattern of narratives somewhat akin to an acrobatic movement, spinning, falling backward and/or diving forward to elaborate Thai state formation while tracing it to concrete encounters of the military and the people on the ground. It is a difficult job, but the author has delivered it effectively through a strictly parsimonious analysis using both theoretically historical interpretations and dramatic evidence from fieldwork.

However, there are some arguments that need to be considered. The epistemological categories that reiterate a construction of the region and people of Pattani as different and distant in terms of their culture, history and religion is persuasive and the evidence collected by Streicher in her ethnographic research is convincing. It is true that the racialised discourse of Thainess is one of the effects of Western imperial formation, particularly during the late nineteenth

and early twentieth century, but racialised Thainess in traditional ways may also have existed long before that time as well. Winichakul (1985) indicates that there have been contestations of cosmologies, Buddhist space and geography in encounters with Western geography since the early Bangkok period. Power relationships in Siam's traditional way of governance, the Mandala, were also so hierarchical that the centre of power could loosely, if not fully, control the peripheries. Central to this system was loyalty to the Buddhist kingdom in Bangkok. Bradley (2013) finds that Siam's destruction of the Pattani sultanate in the course of five wars, in 1785–1786, 1789–1791, 1808 and 1831–1832, consisted of massacres, slave-raiding and the expulsion of refugees – one of the more brutal examples of warfare in the premodern history of Southeast Asia. Driven by racial and religious beliefs, Siam always suppressed the kingdom's principalities with the pride of race and religion. A better way to construe history in the early twentieth century is that the racialised relationships of power were metamorphosed to be characterised as an amalgam of traditional and Westernised racialised imperial formation. For many members of the Thai military, as well as local Thai Buddhists, feelings of racial superiority and difference have been emboldened through the protracted counterinsurgency campaigns in the Deep South.

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# Dress as Symbolic Resistance in Asia

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